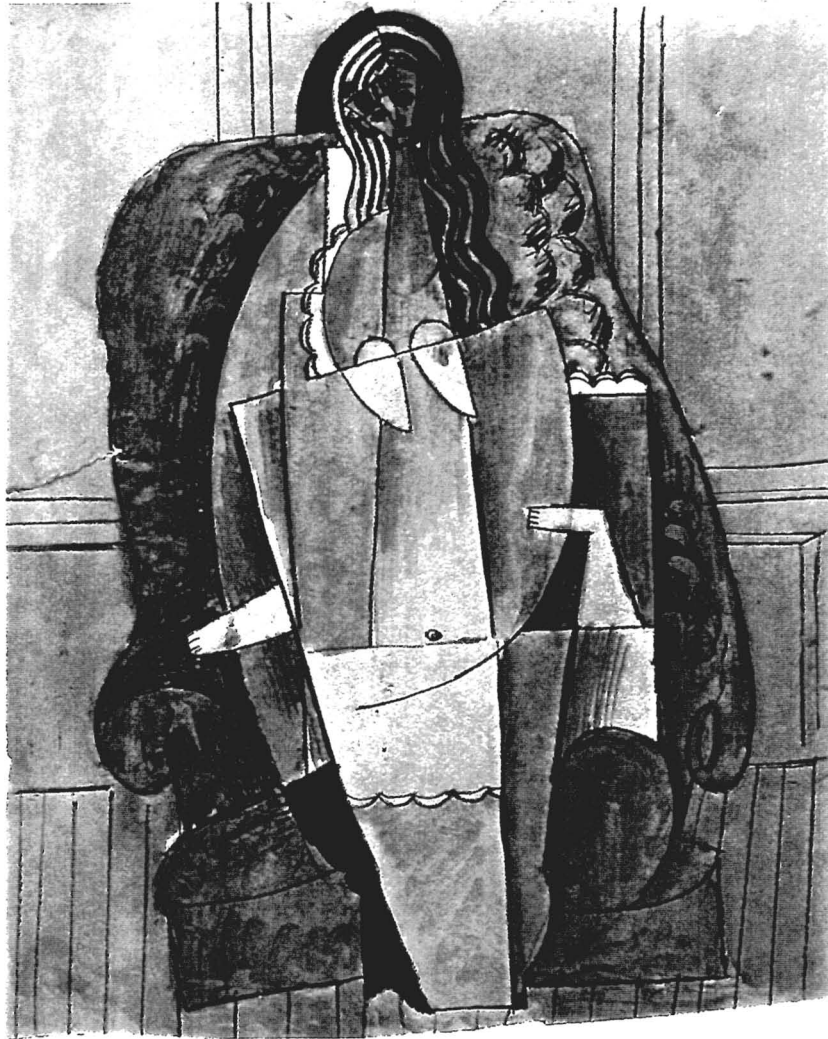


'Revising the Invisible:
Autobiographies by New Zealand Women'

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Revising the Invisible:



Autobiographies by New Zealand Women

This work is dedicated to my family...

*With thanks to my supervisor Dr. Anna
Smith for her continuous support,
positive feedback and encouraging ideas*

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Abstract

I define deconstructive feminist criticism as the reading of woman as sign in language and social systems. My hermeneutics acknowledge dominant constructions of woman, yet give credence to alternative female discursive technologies. This textual approach permits a coordination of feminist and deconstructive theories, by accepting that woman is always already constructed in language. The deconstructive fulcrum is the premise rather than the obstruction to female inscriptions of identity and subjectivity. Women enter the literary sphere through the schism between signifier and signified, as they attempt to reconstitute an *autos* which has been overwritten by exterior signifying systems. Concurrently, prioritising the *graphie* allows a revalidation of the study of autobiography in the cynical postmodern setting.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way*, Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World* and Janet Frame's *An Autobiography* are assessed within this interpretative paradigm. The three autobiographical texts are located at an intersection between dominant patriarchal discourses and a latent matrilineal tradition. I trace their nascent gestures towards the (m)Other as signifier of this alternative female continuum. In addition, each text offers a subsidiary solution to the problematics of the woman artist. I propose a strategic subtext of displaced desire for Ashton-Warner, a transgressive dialect(ic) of madness for Robin Hyde, and the elevation of language to transcendental signifier for Janet Frame. In the overarching framework of my thesis, these thematics will cross and recross as threads of subversive narrative strategies which are a women's poetics.

*'Because in relation to the working of
theory, the / a woman fulfills a twofold
function - as the mute outside that
sustains all systematicity; as a maternal
and still silent ground that nourishes all
foundations'*

Luce Irigaray,
Speculum of the Other Woman

Negotiating Autobiographical Theory: Can the Female Subject Speak Now?

Autobiographical theory appears to be writing its subject into a premature death. Current scepticism about the role and status of the author, the possibility of truth, the plausibility of memory, and even the existence of a unified speaking subject, render autobiography problematic, if not literally and literarily impossible. Deconstructive and postmodern philosophies of language have had a devastating impact on the autobiographical genre, the fundamental tenet of which is the inscription of subjective experience. Today, as theorist Bella Brodzki has observed, 'the autobiographer is always a displaced person: to speak and write from the space marked self-referential is to inhabit, in ontological, epistemological, and discursive terms, no place'.¹

This conundrum is accentuated when the subject which claims to speak autobiographically is a woman. The crux of the feminist curriculum, to uncover and to give voice to hitherto invisible women writers, is undercut at the most dramatic level in the generic hybrid of autobiography.² Limited traditionally to the acceptable sphere of private inscription, women now experience an undercutting of their last literary bastion as authorship and the self become the concepts under siege. Feminist critic Jane Marcus pinpoints the paradox when she says that '[i]ronically, the moment of our recovery of the "re/signed" from their historical abjection coincides with a postmodern critical practice (in which all autobiographical selves are fictions) that questions any account of truth or self that claims a stable reference to reality'.³ Sidonie Smith concurs, warning that '[a]lready elided, woman now confronts the impossibility of ever finding a space in which to assert her own

¹ Bella Brodzki, "Mothers, Displacement and Language", *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988) 243-4.

² On the generic problem of autobiography see James Olney's benchmark definition in "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction", *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 4-7. The ensuing debate over the classification of autobiography does not concern me in this thesis. I use the term 'autobiography' as a formally structured and published document focussing on self-interpretation. I apply the term *belles lettres* only in relation to Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World* and then in a synonymous usage with autobiography, given the dubious authorial intention to publish. See n. 165 of this thesis.

³ Jane Marcus, "Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women", *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1988) 114. Marcus shapes her essay around the pun on women's resignation from the public world and the re-inscription of their signature in the private sphere of autobiographical writings.

agency'.⁴ It is an obligation for the feminist scholar of autobiography, therefore, to establish a critical paradigm within which the feminist and deconstructive/postmodern schools of contemporary thought can be cooperatively beneficial rather than mutually exclusive.

The complexities of autobiographical theory have only become apparent in the last forty years. Georges Gusdorf and James Olney initiated modern autobiographical assumptions with their inquiries into 'the question of the *autos* - how the act of autobiography is at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self'.⁵ This slant was opposed to the previous emphasis placed on the *bios*, or the life read by a neutral *autos* as historical document. Georges Gusdorf's seminal dissertation of 1956, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", prioritises the *autos*, thereby entrenching autobiography as a metaphorical mirror of self. For Gusdorf, the subject masters the anxiety incurred by confronting images of the self through *submitting* to them.⁶ To clarify, the autobiographical 'I' assumes a priority of existence over the author behind the text; the textual 'I' simultaneously creates and is created by the author, and the autobiographer becomes the total of his/her life plus autobiographical writing. As Olney extrapolates, autobiography's establishment as a literary genre is facilitated by a recognition of this inherent fictionalising element, or the dynamic of an "'I" that coming awake to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself'.⁷

Georges Gusdorf is privy to 'the complex and agonising sense that the encounter of a man with his image carries'.⁸ This fear is inspired by the mythical taboos underlying self-reflection; like Narcissus, the autobiographer expects punishment for both self-adoration and revelation of one's sacred and shadowy 'inner space'.⁹ Despite this preliminary *angst*, however, the autobiographical act acts as a cohering agent, in order to render the experiential and reflected selves satisfyingly symmetrical. Gusdorf's autobiographer holds the text up to himself as mirror, and the distance between the two is traversed without difficulty or discontinuity once the act of writing has commenced.

⁴ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practice in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 59.

⁵ Olney, "Autobiography" 19.

⁶ Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", trans. James Olney. Olney 33.

⁷ Olney, "Autobiography" 21.

⁸ Gusdorf 32.

⁹ Ibid.

Gusdorf also discerns that autobiography is predicated on an engrained cultural belief in one's 'special interest':

it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area ... it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; *but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own* (emphasis added).¹⁰

The 'concern' to which Gusdorf refers in this patriarchal model is the ethic of the self as, firstly, separated from others by clearly demarcated ego boundaries and as, secondly, universally representative and acceptable in (his) human essence, morality and ambition. This masculine self - peculiar to Western culture - is defined as psychically healthy¹¹ by its complete and unfragmented state. However, the uncovering of women's literary texts reveals a continuous rebellion against the canonical parameters of such a unitary and coherent representation of the subject. I wish to extend the metaphor of the colonised Other to Western women, and to examine their relation to concentric cultural stereotypes of normal or valid experience and expression.

The originary impetus for men's need to define women as Other has not been unequivocally determined.¹² Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that woman has always been associated with nature, sexuality and the irrational.¹³ As the masculine experience has historically been recorded as universal, woman has come to represent that which is beyond the bounds of the explicable. Since the biblical myth of The Fall, she has symbolised that which must be contained and repressed in order for man to retain the artifices he has set up around him; autonomy, authority, and the institutionalised norm.¹⁴ Concomitant with this theory is a feminist recognition

¹⁰ Benstock 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Note the difference between the feminist use of the term 'Other' to specify women's repression on the grounds of a feared difference, particularly pertaining to the stigma of corporeality. Lacan, on the other hand, uses the term to denote both the Unconscious and the signifier, the primary of which is the phallus. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977) 285. Luce Irigaray further confuses the issue in her replacement of the phallus as 'master signifier' with a privileged feminine/maternal signifier. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 50. See also Irigaray 33, 44.

¹³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Writers and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 11.

¹⁴ Ibid 8.

that the driving force behind women's exclusion from the discursive and legislative hegemony is fear. This must only be reinforced when women attempt to reappropriate the pen, or the means to cultural and social legislation. In response to a nascent women's literature, therefore, man has attempted to re-repress female otherness 'by sending woman back to the camp of nonsense, incoherence'.¹⁵

An appropriate metaphor for women's autobiography is Luce Irigaray's 'specular' mirror or gynaecological instrument, which seeks both to reflect and to penetrate feminine interiority.¹⁶ As such, it is a form of inscription which inherently transgresses cultural dictates concerning women's silence and invisibility. Josette Féral wryly comments on the shattering effect of promoting such a:

concave, deforming, exploding mirror where man, no longer able to recognise himself seeks in vain the image of this lost unit which defines him and whose entity he had always wanted to preserve at the price of his own repression and that of the Other...¹⁷

On the historical continuum, the sign of the mirror has been a constant problematic for women, symbolising concurrently the social definitions of all women's domain and an individual woman's value. As Brodzki and Schenck remark, '[t]he archetypal female prop of the mirror has been used variously in relation to women, and almost always against her'.¹⁸ Women have been consistently framed by the male gaze¹⁹ and imprisoned by their (lack of) looks. The mirror epitomises the cultural cloning of woman as cipher to masculine vanity, sexuality and self-definition, and even to man's biblical downfall. This point is neatly encapsulated by Virginia Woolf's quip that men use women as mirrors to reflect them at twice their natural size.²⁰ The mythic masks which culture has fastened over the flesh-and-blood face of the woman, therefore, both 'lessen [the] dread of her inconstancy' and enable her to be more thoroughly possessed.²¹

Condemned to stand before the cultural hall of mirrors which define them, women lack the luxury of Gusdorf's autobiographer to easily discover

¹⁵ Josette Féral, "Towards a Theory of Displacement", *Sub-Stance* 32 (1981) 59.

¹⁶ See Irigaray 144-6.

¹⁷ Féral 59.

¹⁸ Brodzki & Schenck 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton Books, 1977) 41.

²¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 17.

themselves from the other side.²² As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar synopsis:

[f]or all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself.²³

Accentuated by a historical resistance towards a seizure of the pen by women, women's complex negotiations with the *autos* merely *begin* with the decision to write autobiographically.

The contemporary setting does little to alleviate the obstacles preventing women's approach to the autobiographical genre. In particular, Lacanian theories of the *regard* have led to a fundamental rejection of the authenticity of self-inscription. The 'mirror stage' of psychic development, Lacan notes, represents a child's initiation into the social community, language, and a concomitant drive towards homogeneity. The *moi* or constructed self, therefore, is a fiction imposed and approved from the outside.²⁴ In Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's words, 'the mirror stage ... must be understood as a metaphor for the vision of harmony of a subject essentially in discord'.²⁵ Autobiography similarly represents at best a false mirror, or one which reflects the self as alien and fictional under the guise of unification and symmetry. As Sidonie Smith asserts, '[n]o longer does the subject employ language to its own purposes. For the subject is now more spoken by language than speaker of language'.²⁶ In the current theoretical climate, an autobiographical subject is characterised negatively by its self-estrangement and non-existence beyond the limits of the text.

The superimposition of a deconstructive and postmodern paradigm upon autobiography since the 1970's has thus radically uprooted the foundations of the genre. Yet the difficulties incurred in a blend of deconstructive thought with autobiographical analysis are increased exponentially with the input of feminist theories. Deconstruction has been censured by feminist scholars such as Somer Brodribb for instigating a 'crisis

²² Compare Gusdorf 35: 'I alone have the privilege of discovering myself from the other side of the mirror'.

²³ Gilbert and Gubar *Madwoman* 17.

²⁴ Lacan 4-5.

²⁵ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1986) 26-7.

²⁶ Smith *Subjectivity* 55-6.

of indifference',²⁷ and critical pluralist Nina Baym for its nihilistic undertones and a vocabulary which 'yields identical results no matter which text it analyses'.²⁸ More dramatically, Jane Marcus objects to deconstructive criticism as a male activity, an assertion of ego, a violation or rape of the text,²⁹ and demands a separatist model of feminist thought. As Elizabeth Meese admits, feminism confronts 'persistent fragmentation and alienation' at the hands of deconstruction, which may irrevocably 'undermine feminism's ability to form the political coalitions needed to bring about change'.³⁰ Yet Meese notes that the driving force behind 'Feminism's phobic representation of deconstruction' appears to be a desire to maintain homogeneity, or a reversed politics of non-inclusion:

[t]he threat of deconstruction ... is that it speaks a 'different' language, a language of difference which cannot be controlled by a language of presence, the language of nondeconstructive feminism, which wants to exclude what it sees as other than 'itself'.³¹

I reassert the validity of deconstructive feminist criticism as a way of reading which renders feasible female subjectivity and narrative discourse. The prerequisite recognition to a constructive use of the tools of deconstruction, however, is that women still write against a patriarchal referent. Despite my contemporary location in a postmodern discursive which attempts to deny hierarchies, I maintain that women's texts along the historical continuum must be viewed as evidence of a politics of re/action. At present, we still write, criticise and theorise from an intersection of patriarchal inheritance and female innovation or excavation. Jane Gallop provides a dialectic for my critical positioning:

[I]n our culture, we have a singular identity, one name, the name of the father. For the purpose of consolidating an identity, one-half of our parentage is denied. That one is the child of two parents is another way of formulating the difference within. The feminist critic in her inheritance from both feminism and criticism lives the at once enabling and

²⁷ Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1992) 13.

²⁸ Nina Baym, "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Theory", *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 49.

²⁹ Jane Marcus, "Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3 (1984) 83-4.

³⁰ Elizabeth Meese, *(Ex)Tensions: Re/Figuring Feminist Criticism* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1990) 4. I use a qualifier as Meese's aim is to reconcile the two schools of thought.

³¹ *Ibid* 18.

disabling tension of a difference within. We write in sexual difference. That is the critical difference in feminist inquiry.³²

In other words, it is not sufficient to replace the absolute system of patriarchy with an uncritical feminist Utopia. As the title epigraph to this thesis predicates, the texts under study seek a matrilineal pre-text which has traditionally been silenced, yet continue to encounter a tenacious paternal heritage in their formation of identity, subjectivity and narrative. In my analytical response, I promote deconstructive feminist criticism as a dialectical model which is both textual and feminist, and which focuses specifically on women's relation to language and other male-dominated social structures. Aware of the inseparability of experience from language, I am committed to interpretations of the sign 'woman' in a constructive sense, but also bound to this sign as it is used in patriarchal systems.

Conterminously, I reconstruct and reappropriate that most traditional of autobiographical motifs, the mirror, within a women's alternative theoretical paradigm. Lacan tunders that the subject inspecting its reflection in a mirror is an abstraction of the self's sensitivity to its *imago*, or Ideal-I.³³ Gusdorf evokes an equivalent trope in his definition of the self under the lens of autobiography:

[a]utobiography ... requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time.³⁴

The thrust of archetypal autobiographies such as the *Confessions* of Rousseau and Saint Augustine has been to cover over such inconveniences as gaps in memory and the inadequacy of language, in order to achieve the appearance of synthesis, or a seamless whole.³⁵ As Shari Benstock illustrates:

[t]he effect of such a distancing and reconstituting is precisely the effect of the mirror stage: a recognition of the alienating force within the specular (the 'regard') that leads to the desperate shoring-up of the reflected image against disintegration and division.³⁶

³² Meese 23 makes an incomplete reference to Jane Gallop's "Critical Response" as the reprinted version of a response to an edition of *Critical Inquiry* on writing and sexual difference.

³³ Lacan 2.

³⁴ Gusdorf 35.

³⁵ Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical", Benstock 1988 20.

³⁶ Ibid 15.

The symmetrical mirror image is a mirage, a recognition that Gusdorf gestures toward and Lacan makes explicit. The autobiographical self is, in fact, the product of the artificial process of writing, which attempts desperately to elide the gap created by itself as medium.

Therefore, I perceive in Gusdorf's work an implicit recognition of the split between the interior, discordant *je* and the *moi* which is effected by language. Yet his theoretical framework continues to appear deficient when applied to women's life stories. For women writers, the schism (as promoted by the deconstructionalists) between an experiential self and its ability to be articulated is widened by the oversimplified readings *already applicable* to women in society and policed by the overarching sign system which is language. Indeed, this split is less of a crisis than an appropriate point of entry for feminist theorists into the site of postmodern autobiographical theory:

[n]o mirror of her era, the female autobiographer *takes as a given* that selfhood is mediated; her invisibility results from her lack of a tradition, her marginality in male-dominated tradition, her fragmentation - social and political as well as psychic.³⁷

As a significant proportion of feminist scholars concur, women have always been more sensitive to the split between their *je* and *moi*.³⁸ That is, they commonly experience a *hiatus* between the façade they are forced to present as a mirror of cultural norms, and the self behind the mirror which may be at variance with social doctrine. If women's writings conform to Sidonie Smith's definition of autobiography as the breaking of imposed social prescriptions, then these autobiographical testimonials cannot be defined as mirroring their historical milieux:

[w]omen who do not challenge those gender ideologies and the boundaries they place around a woman's proper life script, textual inscription, and speaking voice do not write autobiography. Culturally silenced, they remain sentenced to death in the fictions of woman surrounding them.³⁹

We may summarise that women can only reflect society's discourse if they are caught, like Medusa, in the mirror which another holds up to them.

Brodzki and Schenck 1.

Benstock "Authorizing" 16.

Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and Fictions of Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 44.

As Estelle Jelinek points out, women's autobiographical writings are more likely to mirror the unspoken, invisible margins of societal thought than that of the central establishment.⁴⁰ Françoise Lionnet is in accord, invoking a dynamic of re-appropriation against Gusdorf's colonising model. The female writer is thus:

engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of the female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. She perceives these myths as alienating and radically other and her aim is often the retrieval of a more authentic image...⁴¹

Teresa de Lauretis concurs that, faced with a 'mythical mechanism [that] produces the human being as man and everything else as, not even "woman", but non-man', women must be committed to the discovery of possible forms of identification and self-definition.⁴² As will become crucial in the thematic content of this thesis, De Lauretis suggests that women seek alternative mythic mechanisms to the Utopian.⁴³ In other words, permanent recourse to the concept of transcendence - through literature, for example - is a limited solution. What must also be sought are definitions and identities for women that already concretely exist in the 'margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus'.⁴⁴ For example, a re/vision of existent language and a revalorising of the representations and functions of the female body may provide access to alternative truths and social histories.

Such a radical linguistic, cultural and political agenda, however, must inevitably precipitate a backlash from the dominant authorities. Due to the firm entrenchment of culturally normative standards in their vehicle language, and 'since [the] collective imagination is so overwhelmingly nonfemale',⁴⁵ a testimony written from the margins of social and historical circumstance is bound to appear unfamiliar, and even untrue. Long accused of drenching their fictional writing in subjective emotion, and plagued by 'the age-old

⁴⁰ Estelle Jelinek (ed.), *Women's Autobiography: Essays In Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 7.

⁴¹ Françoise Lionnet, "Métissage, Emancipation, and Female Textuality in Two Francophone Writers", *Life/Lines*, eds. Brodzki and Schenck 261.

⁴² Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 121.

⁴³ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Lionnet 261.

pervasive decoding of all female writing as autobiographical',⁴⁶ women are now vulnerable to the disclaimer that their written life experience is fiction. As Helen Buss ironically notes:

now that autobiographical reference is becoming popular with postmodern poets and prose writers, women are often accused of concentrating too much on the facts of their actual lived lives, being unable to realise that the purpose of the new, more playful autobiography is to deface the idea of referential existence of the self.⁴⁷

Because *one* woman's written testimony to experience deliberately conflicts with historically variable definitions of literary conformity and stereotypes of 'woman', her writing breaks boundaries of social desirability, control and, more subtly, cultural comprehension. From this realisation, it is a small step towards understanding the exclusion of women's autobiographies from the literary canon.

I have illustrated that in mining the split between the *je* and the *moi*, the ambition of women's autobiographical writing is surprisingly cooperative with that of the deconstructionalist manifesto. A vital difference is that in the case of women's writing, deconstructionalist ideas *inform* the autobiographical project rather than rendering it helpless:

[a]lienation is not the *result* of creating a self in language, as it is for Lacanian and Barthesian critics of autobiography. Instead, alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what *motivates* the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act (emphasis added).⁴⁸

The female autobiographical objective can therefore be hypothesised as the projection of opposing selves to those which are superimposed upon them under the culturally defined category 'woman'. One of its primary aspirations is towards the reclamation of language and identity that has been repressed or appropriated by an exterior authority. Far from bewailing an insufficient encapsulation of some essential selfhood, women's autobiographies embrace the notion that the self is, and has always been, manipulated by social and

⁴⁶ Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?", *New York Literary Forum* 12-13 (1984) 6.

⁴⁷ Helen M. Buss, *Mapping Ourselves: Canadian Women's Autobiography* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993) 197.

⁴⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice", Benstock 1988 41.

linguistic signifiers. Therefore, female autobiographers reconstruct the masculine concept of 'subject' because they move self-consciously in the space of desire between signifier and signified.⁴⁹ In addition, through a pre-emptive motion, women's autobiographical acts replace the masculine gaze which has simultaneously defined, conscribed and rendered women invisible.⁵⁰

To recapitulate, the fundamental obstacle to women's autobiography is not the limitations of language as signifying practice. Rather, women primarily encounter the reflecting surfaces which society holds up as the image of 'woman' to which the individual must aspire.⁵¹ Women confront the troubling mirror prior to and as an impetus for autobiographical writing, because for women the *first* split in subjectivity is not between the experiential self and the 'I' representable in language, but between some interiority of being and the imposition of a superficial social identity. As Susan Stanford Friedman theorises:

[n]ot recognizing ourselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness - the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription.⁵²

In an attempt to arrive at some genuine sense of self, therefore, the woman writes autobiography as a means of shattering society's mirror and replacing it with her own way of seeing. Her alternative, specular mirror (narrative) celebrates the fissures which Gusdorf's autobiographer attempted to conceal, by promoting the inevitably fragmented and multiple self (identity), and by exposing its unified, self-knowing counterpart as myth. By speaking in an unfamiliar voice (subjectivity), she explodes the conflation of the masculine and the universal, and projects images of herself which are at odds with the names with which the dominant discourse has labelled her. Gradually unravelling the cultural myths which bind them, women writers seek to contextualise themselves in a female reality which pre-dates patriarchal imposition, or always already exists. Such a gesture aims to displace the

⁴⁹ As Irigaray 133 suggests, 'any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine". When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary'.

⁵⁰ Compare Irigaray 143 for a poetic evocation of imploding masculine stereotypes of the female through the use of the specular mirror: 'perhaps through this specular surface which sustains discourse is found not the void of nothingness but the dazzle of multifaceted speleology. A scintillating and incandescent concavity, of language also, that threatens to set fire to fetish-objects and gilded eyes'.

⁵¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London: Penguin, 1973) 27.

⁵² Stanford Friedman 39.

phallus as the original signifier, or to replace Lacan's Other with a search for the feminist (m)Other. The only recourse to such a transgression is to banish these voices from the literary mainstream. The dominant discourse has thus forcibly dismissed or re-repressed unruly women's texts to that which Elaine Showalter coined as the literary 'wild zone'.⁵³

Autobiography has acted as a master or paternal discourse which has served to power and define centres, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West.⁵⁴ On a basic level, the role of the woman autobiographer can thus be designated as de-constructive; to collapse the dialectic of the culturally acceptable 'inside' and fringe 'outside' by centring the voices of the silenced or marginalised. As Elizabeth Meese points out:

Feminist Literary Criticism ... has always represented itself as having a substantial cast in the 'margins', but perhaps if this identity is to persist, we should consider how it might designate a space figured as 'all margin' in the interest of disseminating the centre and transforming the place of knowledge into a free space.⁵⁵

For women, Janet Verner Gunn's theory that '[t]he autobiographical perspective has ... to do with taking oneself up and bringing oneself to language'⁵⁶ is confirmed because they have been written over by a dominant, universalised other, and written out of an authoritative access to language. Thus, the female autobiographical act tends towards *repossession* of the self. This is achieved through a *rapprochement* between the subject and the language to which entry has traditionally been limited, *id est* between the self and the Unconscious (m)Other.

The shattering of the unified subject is not due solely, however, to the recent outbreak of women's voices. The Classically inherited desire for a complete and harmonious self was undermined in the early twentieth century by the social and political upheaval inherent in world war, and a pervading Western loss of religious faith.⁵⁷ This was reflected in the literary sphere during the Modernist period, which crucially and irreversibly challenged the relation between self, consciousness and language. At the cutting edge of

⁵³ Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", *Critical Inquiry* 8:2 (Winter 1981) 200.

⁵⁴ Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1992) xvii.

⁵⁵ Meese 3.

⁵⁶ Janet Verner Gunn, *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1982) 11.

⁵⁷ See Smith, *Subjectivity* ch. III, esp. 54-5. Smith here enumerates the attacks on the subject which have characterised the twentieth century.

such a *bouleversement* were the avant-garde women's texts of this period, notably those of an autobiographical nature such as Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*. For example, Stein's text encapsulates the *différance* motivating the self's *imago* through the displacement of her authorial voice on to Alice B. Toklas, who ostensibly writes Stein's life. The experience incurred by such a radical insight was such that Stein 'ceased to feel real to herself', and suffered 'a profound identity crisis'.⁵⁸ Woolf, in a famed passage on the alienating mirror-image, moves towards an 'instinctive notion' that the 'sealed vessel' of selfhood is an artificial construct, and that only when it 'cracks' can provide access to the 'reality' of the unconscious.⁵⁹ Shari Benstock aligns the female modernists and the post-structuralists through their mutual desire to dismantle the canonical norm and to reveal its defensive underpinnings: '[i]t is [the] white, male, heterosexual ethic that post-structuralist critics have exposed behind the facade of a supposedly apolitical artistic practice'.⁶⁰ Perhaps we can begin to accept less uneasily the wedding of such disparate schools of thought as feminism and post-structuralism's deconstructive offspring, once we realise their fundamental union against the imposition of rigid, hierarchical paradigms of meaning.

A facile acceptance of their compatibility should, nevertheless, be treated somewhat sceptically. In their vital war against the self, and particularly the narrative subject, current philosophies of language remove the fulcrum for a reclamation of women's written experience. Such approaches threaten to erase 'the subject's ability to reflect on the social discourse and challenge its determinations'.⁶¹ Solidarity grounded in a common experience of disenfranchisement underpins feminist theory and political practice. Yet, as Sidonie Smith ironically summarises, 'it is difficult to coalesce a call to political action founded upon some kind of communal identity around a constantly deferred point of departure'.⁶² Somer Brodribb agrees, explaining that '[t]he postmodern condition tolerates no binary opposition of black to white, female to male; it is embarrassed by words like "struggle" and "solidarity"'.⁶³ In

⁵⁸ Janet Hobhouse. Intro. to *Everybody's Autobiography* by Gertrude Stein (London: Virago, 1938) xi.

⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 122. See Benstock "Authorizing" 29 for a detailed analysis of this episode.

Benstock "Authorizing" 21.

Judith Alcock, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", *Signs* 13 (Spring 1988) 417.

Smith, *Subjectivity* 156.

Brodribb xxv. Brodribb reiterates the point: '[w]ords like Other and difference are taking the place of formerly known words deemed uncool or too simplistic, words like *oppression*, *exploitation*, and

addition, Smith notes that despite their respective manifestos, modernist and postmodern theories do not appear to have made any impact on the essentialism prescribed and circumscribing women: '[t]hus while "man" has begun to change figures, "woman" remains the object of, and in, contestatory male discourse ... and as such remains "muted, elided or unrepresentable in dominant discourses"'.⁶⁴ Despite the apparently apolitical agendas of deconstruction and postmodernism, a centralised discourse is still innate against which women's voices and experience are exteriorised. The discourses of postmodernism continue to render woman invisible as a condition of her gender and, contradictorily, further erase her on the grounds of her supposed lack of self.

As I have suggested, theorists such as Brodribb deny the positive potential of deconstructive thought for feminism on the grounds that such usage maintains the masculine as referent. Yet given the social, historical and philosophical contexts of the New Zealand autobiographies under study, such a view becomes idealistically esoteric, if not redundant. More apposite is the conundrum which continues to haunt any feminist analysis of literary texts - how, having instigated a call towards transgressive representations of the self and reality, and towards alternative styles and structures of writing, we must now avoid condemning women to a newly prescriptive form of essentialism. As critics Susan Sniader Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck warn:

we must question descriptive terms such as 'fragmented', often used to devalue women's forms, for they are only meaningful if we are measuring women's art against some pre-established norms of 'wholeness' and 'seamlessness' ... If women's work were at the centre of our definitions, our hierarchy of values would very likely be changed.⁶⁵

Although I have moved within a Euro-American theoretical paradigm in my negotiation of autobiographical theory, this discussion has pivoted on an issue of global relevance with its attentiveness to disfranchised discourses of the Other. A study of New Zealand examples is particularly pertinent due to the nation's colonised background, as both feminism and post-colonialism undertake the crucial task of decoding and responding dialogically to

domination'. bell hooks, *Yearning, race, gender and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 51-2.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Subjectivity* 57.

⁶⁵ Susan Sniader Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck, "[Why] are there no great women critics? And what difference does it make?", *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, eds. Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn Torton Beck (Wisconsin: Wisconsin UP, 1979) 87.

centralised discourses. Once questioned, both the monolithic structures of the patriarchal social architecture trapping women, and the paternal colonial myths haunting the development of an autonomous nation, become flawed. The three texts discussed in this thesis are Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way*, Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World*, and Janet Frame's three-volume *An Autobiography*. Due to their overwhelming neglect in New Zealand literary criticism and their lack of public recognition, analytical attention to these autobiographies fulfils one of the fundamental objectives of feminist scholarship. By revising the invisible status of women's texts, we can both access an alternative history, and destabilise the canonical assumptions of literary authority and meaning. In other words, the purpose of my study is to *uncover what has always been there*, through a contextualisation of these autobiographies within the continuity of women's (silenced) discourse. Once rendered visible, the narratives of the Other may become liminal rather than marginal, serving as thresholds which effect transformation from a concentric to a heterogeneous social, cultural and literary reality.

My critical focus is on both the thematic and structural responses of women's narratives to traditional depictions of the self in relation to language, others, and the body. The selected autobiographers constantly confront stereotypical images of woman which bear little relevance to, or an oversimplified interpretation of, their proper lives. I will suggest that each writer forges an alternative philosophy, or solution, to predominant cultural constructs of woman. The three texts serve as examples, therefore, of a women's poetics, and as opportunities for a feminist hermeneutics. Predicated on this assumption is an attempt to discover what forms of catharsis are available to these women, both in their mediation between roles, and in their attempts to reconstitute the relationship between identity, subjectivity, and narrative.

Janet Frame's *An Autobiography*, written from a deconstructive awareness of the self enslaved in language, redefines autobiography as mythmaking. She thus converts a victim complex of difference into an exploitation of *différance*. As the active agent of personal myths and a manipulator of disguise, Frame achieves a self-determining dynamic which allows her to transform socio-cultural myths about centres and margins, truth and fantasy, history and memory. Literature, therefore, allows her to transcend society yet to remain simultaneously rooted in reality, or to simultaneously inhabit marginal social spaces and the centre of her own created universe. In *I Passed This Way*, Sylvia Ashton-Warner focuses

heavily on the arbitration between social roles and personal freedom. Yet this ostensibly traditional narrative belies an unruly subtext, which siphons off the desires and discourses she cannot announce in her coordination of woman and artist. Although her solution, too, is art, the transgressive element within the text is developed covertly through symbolic patterning, particularly pertaining to sexualised evocations of nature. Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World* is assessed within the paradigm of madness, a theme which is consistently privileged across the three texts. Hyde's autobiography strives towards a re/vision of woman as Other in her decoding of the link between women's culturalised corporeality and the stigma of hysterical discourse. By associating herself with the neurotic and small voices of the mad and female fringe, Hyde both suggests an alternative women's discourse and pre-empts the authorities that would appropriate her madness. Her textual project, and my analysis in Chapter Four, aim once again to divest women of the pejorative mantle associated with difference.

The remaining emphasis in my discussion is on the invisible element within each text, which is the suppressed female body. The motivation behind such silencing is revised as representing *resistance* rather than capitulation to patriarchal definitions of propriety, particularly in the association between sexuality and a dreaded maternal destiny. Yet I will also question whether these women's bodies *are* successfully banished, or whether they become visible through narrative subtexts, fissures and gaps. Notably in the case of Ashton-Warner, the female body becomes Other with a difference - *it becomes (m)Other*. The active agent of the author contains, suppresses and releases its desires rather than leaving it to the mercy of a dictating outside force. She thus makes it primary signifier, as well as representative of the Unconscious. I add the 'm' as an indication of the influence of the proper mother upon the formation of identity, subjectivity and narrative, and to signify the antecedent female tradition and consciousness underlying the patriarchal mantle of culturalisation.

It is already clear that the vital variable in these negotiations, as well as the ascendant proffered solution, is writing itself, or the seizure of the pen and the transformation of experience into fiction. Overarching questions will thus include:

-in what ways can language both create and transcend social masks and myths of self?

- how do these writers attempt to reconcile the experiential dichotomy of the woman and the artist?
- do the psychodynamics of female creativity encourage different styles and structures than are traditionally associated with the autobiographical genre?

I will show throughout that the nature of the self which the female writer experiences and re-creates in the autobiographical act is radically variant from that prescribed by conventional masculine texts and Gusdorfian theorists. Indeed, the very conditions emphasised by Gusdorf as prerequisites to autobiography are overturned in the female text. As Susan Stanford Friedman illustrates:

the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community ... where lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being.⁶⁶

Taking their lead from psychoanalytical theorist Nancy Chodorow, feminist critics such as Friedman and Mary Mason suggest that the woman writer defines herself not through clearly circumscribed ego boundaries, but through identification with some (m)Other. As Mason theorises, from the archetypal female models Julian of Norwich and Marjory Kempe, 'the egoistic secular archetype that Rousseau handed down ... finds no echo in women's writing.' Rather, women's emergent and inscribed identity usually acknowledges the presence of another, relative consciousness.⁶⁷ In Chapter Two, I will discuss this model of self and (m)Other as it occurs across these women's texts, and assess the validity of a matrilineal loyalty as one solution to the dilemmas confronting women autobiographers.

Another fundamental variable to be examined is the factors which inspire and restrain the autobiographical moment for women. Contrary to the teleological aims of many male autobiographies, in women's texts the act of writing is typically synonymous with a coming to identity and subjectivity:

[w]omen do not look back to recreate themselves in keeping with some finally perceived ideal; rather, they look back towards the moment at which they found the courage to

⁶⁶ Stanford Friedman 38.

⁶⁷ Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers", Olney 207.

move forward into as yet unnarrated and unexplored ways of living.⁶⁸

This discovery of a voice often has a paradoxical aspect. The events privileged tend to be those which shape the narrative in counterpoint to the 'valorized trajectory' of the female life,⁶⁹ thus promoting the subject as something other than woman. The domestic roles of women, and particularly the social credibility attached to such occupations, are frequently denounced as debilitating. Of common occurrence is the privileging of artistic production over biological reproduction. Writers such as Anaïs Nin and Hélène Cixous have, across the span of the twentieth century, replaced childbirth with a metaphor of self-delivery through writing. For authors such as these, '[w]riting - for publication - represents entrance into the world of others, and by the means of that passage a rebirth: the access through writing to the status of an autonomous subjectivity beyond the limits of feminine propriety'.⁷⁰ As I have stated, women writers frequently utilise a (m)Othering dialectic with relation to their writing, underlining their incapacity (or lack of desire) to define the self as an entirely isolated entity. In a positive sense, the textualisation of a female 'I' means escape from the sphere inhabited by those 'relative beings' (as Simone De Beauvoir defined wives and mothers)⁷¹ who experience the world only through the mediation of men: '[t]o write is to come out of the wings, and to appear, however briefly, centre stage'.⁷² To mother a text, in other words, is a means of redressing biological maternity as destiny.⁷³

As women's autobiographies often celebrate the rebirth of the woman as writer through transcendence of a negatively defined condition 'woman',⁷⁴ it is fruitful to explore the ways in which our writers negotiate the terms 'woman' and 'artist', and to assess whether they appear to reconcile these aspects of their identity. Contained within this thematic is an examination of the intersection between sexuality and textuality. For all of the writers, female sexual desire is overtly banished to the margins of the text yet, particularly in

⁶⁸ Carolyn Heilbrun, "Women's Autobiographical Writings: New Forms", *Prose Studies* 8:2 (Sept. 1985) 21.

⁶⁹ Nancy K. Miller, "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France", Brodzki & Schenck 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid 54.

⁷¹ Miller 54 cites De Beauvoir's famous expression.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ We recall Freud's imperative 'feminine [phase] to which she is *biologically destined*'. Sigmund Freud, "Femininity", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74) 119. As Irigaray points out, Freud rarely applies the term 'biological destiny' to male sexuality, and equates such a concept with women's *maternal* destiny. *Speculum*, 32 and 15n.

⁷⁴ Miller 54.

Ashton-Warner's text, a more positive awareness of the female body leaks through the cracks afforded by imagery and symbolism. In particular, the sublimation of unruly sexual desire often results in a projection on to the natural landscape. Thus, the apparent romanticisation of nature, as opposed to oppressive social environments, is subject to a more ambiguous reading in its simultaneous evocation of both freedom and danger. Nevertheless, none of these writers achieve the positive celebration of the female body that characterises more recent works by, for example, Alice Walker or Monique Wittig. All still conform, to varying extents, to social legislation binding female sexuality within reproductive roles and as objects of male desire.

Frequently mirroring the complex orientation of the female autobiographer is the form or narrative structure of the autobiographical text. Autobiography has conventionally aimed to fashion the narrative life into a coherent whole. Estelle Jelinek suggests that this is a simplified process in male autobiographies, as men's typical focus on success in one field is unmediated by other externally conditioned and internalised pressures. On the other hand, 'irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women' because of the 'multi-dimensionality of woman's socially conditioned roles'.⁷⁵ As I shall explain, the continuous playing off between women's chosen vocation as writer and their socially legislated self-sacrificing positions of wife and mother is mirrored in the autobiographical strategies of style and structure, content and margin.

In the displacement of not only sexual desire, but yearnings towards creativity and freedom, we witness a continuation of the process exemplified in nineteenth century women's novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, in which 'women writers ... responded to sociocultural restraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession'.⁷⁶ Artistic expression being itself a disruption of accepted behavioural parameters, female experimentation in form constitutes a double-crossed transgression. It will be assessed whether these writers deliberately use alternative forms as subversive techniques, and therefore consciously commit themselves to what Estelle Jelinek perceives as 'a continuous female tradition of discontinuity'.⁷⁷ Certainly an implicit desire for some form of female historicity is displayed, as the writers rebel

⁷⁵ Jelinek 17.

⁷⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want?: A Postcard from the Volcano", *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 34.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

instinctively against absorption of a literature which is at once inherited from England, and exclusively masculine. Again, the desire to break with the forms of a tradition which is both inflexible and unfamiliar has tended to consolidate the grounds upon which women's autobiographical writings have been ignored, in New Zealand as worldwide.

For Georges Gusdorf, all autobiography is 'a matter of concluding a peace treaty and a new alliance between himself and the world ... he would thus provide witness that he has not existed in vain; he chooses not revolution but reconciliation'.⁷⁸ I would respond, however, that the reassurances of the confessional mode are less available to women, for whom the very act of writing is one of rebellion against a world which would silence and overwrite them. For Sylvia Ashton-Warner, who writes to justify her position in reaction to the patriarchal New Zealand educative system, or for Frame and Hyde who decry the bigotry of psychological institutions, the autobiographical act re-inscribes the original sin of speaking out against the structures of power. In general, women writers are not privileged in the assumption that they have an audience to confess to.⁷⁹ It is necessary to re-read the term 'confessional' in terms more appropriate to women's texts, by realising that the written experience is not offered in the traditional Olympian pose of self-congratulation. Rather, women's autobiography aspire towards empathy and solidarity with other women, and act as a voice for those who remain silenced. Lacking the opportunity and perhaps the internal drive towards didacticism and self-aggrandisement, women's autobiographies are characterised by understatement and a need 'to convince readers of their self-worth'.⁸⁰ Women characteristically use autobiography as a paradoxical dialectic, 'partly as a mode of self-denial ... and draw back - as women have traditionally done - from making large claims of importance. Even as they tell of unusual accomplishment ... they finally hide from self-assertion'.⁸¹ Rather than displaying themselves proudly before the reader in the knowledge that the act of confession brings reconciliation, the woman writer recrosses ground that is already violated in daring to remind us of her actions.

Josette Féral suggests that 'it is because the woman is always already excluded from the history of thought and from discourse that it is easier for

⁷⁸ Gusdorf 39.

⁷⁹ Stanford Friedman 39 explains that a position of accepted individualism is a reflection of privilege which has normally been denied women.

⁸⁰ Jelinek 15.

⁸¹ Ibid.

her to interrogate the system from outside and call it into question'.⁸² It is vital to realise the double edge of the operative dynamic in such cultural dissension. Although women may turn this peripheral position into a vantage point, they are simultaneously forced to reaffirm their position as outsiders, an acknowledgment which cannot be wholly satisfactory and which involves new dangers of essentialist stereotyping. The autobiographies in question epitomise a dialogical or ambivalent discourse, in their mediation between locating the self inside and outside social acceptability, speech and silence, passivity and power, artistic asceticism and sexuality. In other words, they negotiate with the omnipresent law-of-the-father even as they seek to resuscitate a submerged matrilineal narrative. That this tactical tactfulness takes place across the written page, traditionally both the palimpsest of social legislation and a forbidden zone for women, enhances both the danger and the potentially subversive power of such an action. As Sheila Rowbotham poetically evokes:

[b]ut always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity ... The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being - woman.⁸³

As women's texts show a canonically atypical orientation toward the self and writing,⁸⁴ then the reader of women's autobiography must similarly show sensitivity towards the act of reading. Annette Kolodny's 1979 essay, "Dancing Through the Minefield", pronounced irrevocably that our reading of texts is conditioned heavily by a paternal heritage that has been authorised as normative, and that this has traditionally discounted the female voice:

we read well, and with pleasure, what we already know how to read; and what we know how to read is to a large extent dependent upon what we have already read (works from

⁸² Féral 57.

⁸³ Rowbotham 31. Compare William Du Bois's dual consciousness theory for American Blacks, examined in Stanford Friedman 40: '[t]he Negro ... is gifted with second-sight in this American world - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... One ever feels his twoness'.

⁸⁴ Olney "Autobiography" 17.

which we've developed our expectations and learned our interpretative strategies).⁸⁵

Because masculine experience has been written under the guise of the universal, then we are bound to interpret women's autobiography as a gendered experience. For male writers 'the fact of their gender is given and received literarily as a mere *donnée* of personhood',⁸⁶ a luxury not available to women who are constantly battering against the entrenched norm of the autobiographical 'I'. Indeed, the canon of the autobiographical text 'in general fails to interrogate gender as a meaningful category of reference or interpretation'.⁸⁷ As we move to an analysis of the texts themselves, therefore, I shall consistently give purchase to the attached female signatures. As Nancy Miller proposes:

[t]o read for difference, therefore, is to perform a diacritical gesture, to refuse a politics of reading that depends on the fiction of a neutral (neuter) economy of textual production and reception...⁸⁸

In studying the autobiographies of Janet Frame, Robin Hyde and Sylvia Ashton-Warner, I will evade the neutral middle ground (which is a theoretical minefield) through a simultaneous acknowledgment of patriarchal literary, social and cultural narratives as influential, and through the re/researching of attempts by these authors to establish, and join, an alternative matrilineal tradition.

⁸⁵ Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism", Showalter 1985 154.

⁸⁶ Miller 55-6.

⁸⁷ Ibid 56.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

**Translating the (m)Other Tongue:
Subtexts and Pretexts
in Women's Subjectivity, Identity, Narrative**

*'as psychoanalytic theorists have shown,
the central project of our (patriarchal) culture
necessitates the mother's absence'*

Gail Twersky Reimer

'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers'

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In my last chapter, I introduced the idea that the texts of Janet Frame, Robin Hyde and Sylvia Ashton-Warner all mediate between the desire to discover and enter a female literary tradition, and a concurrent need for acceptance in the privileged masculine sphere of language, legislation and canonisation. At the crux of conflicting affiliations to masculine and matrilineal discourses is the attempt to coordinate the identities of woman and artist. Integral to this dilemma is the influence of each real or autobiographical mother. The discussion in this chapter will elaborate on the ambivalent positioning of all three narrators *vis à vis* their maternal role model, and the effects of these relationships upon autobiographical constructions of identity, relationship and narrative. In this manner, I will assess whether a celebration or rejection of a women's continuous or matrilineal tradition is offered as a solution in the encounter between the three writers and their alienating social, cultural and literary contexts.

Whereas writers such as Marcel Proust and James Joyce trace a steady movement away from childhood dependence on the mother, and towards the public realm dictated by the law-of-the-father,⁸⁹ the selected women writers consistently record dichotomous pulls towards and away from both mother and father. Such indecisive gestures constitute an effort to establish individual identity and relationships, to balance personal integrity with social decorum, and to mediate between the experience and conventional dictates of being a woman. Janet Frame and Robin Hyde

am conscious that this is a generalisation, of which D. H. Lawrence, for example, is a notable exception. Indeed, the fact that Proust's text is haunted by the mother supports the notion that such a movement is impossible.

demonstrate a relational dialectic clearly split between empathy with, and rejection of, their mothers as socio-cultural victims. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, on the other hand, promotes the mother as positive role model, and projects a subtext of maternal longing. In the latter's autobiography, negotiation takes place between involvement in a heterosexual marriage (which is in part culturally manipulated), and an awareness of frustrated desires for (m)other women. The autobiographical mothers of Frame and Hyde symbolise the necessary sacrifice of writing to conventional female roles. Redressal of the mother's plight by these daughters is portrayed as involving a certain degree of repudiation. Ashton-Warner's mother, on the other hand, prefigures the narrator's (difficult) coordination of the woman/artist dichotomy. Yet for all three autobiographers, the implication of *becoming* a mother consolidates the regime of repression imposed by social constructs upon active, self-aware female sexuality.

The theoretical backdrop to such a discussion is both dense and dynamic. In general, feminist poetics of the last two decades have redressed the matrophobia⁹⁰ which had previously permeated women's literature and theories about women's writing.⁹¹ Influenced by Nancy Chodorow's watershed *The Reproduction of Mothering* and by French psychoanalytic theorists,⁹² the tendency of feminism(s) has been towards a dismissal of Freud's doctrine of the father as central family figure, and as repository of the Symbolic which is law and its vehicle language. Chodorow's alternative theory of female identity formation pivots upon the child's pre-Oedipal merger with the mother, and the adult female's pressing need to recreate this union in ensuing relationships.⁹³ The result is, as I stated in the opening chapter, that women in/and their writing are characterised by flexible ego and body boundaries, and an

⁹⁰ As Showalter announced in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics": '[h]ating one's mother was the feminist enlightenment of the 50's and 60's; but it is only a metaphor for hating oneself. Female literature of the 1970's goes beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother'. In Showalter 1985 135.

⁹¹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 45.

⁹² The common ground of the theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva is an analysis of Western culture as *phallogocentric*. As Ann Rosalind Jones summarises: '[s]ymbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else - including women'. "Writing the Body: toward an Understanding of *L'Écriture Féminine*", *Feminist Studies* 7:2 (Summer 1981): 248. The rich feminists respond in different ways; Cixous, by promoting the female libidinal unconscious in language or a diverse *jouissance*, Kristeva the liberatory potential in hysterical or semiotic discourses, Irigaray the diffuse female sexuality and its potentially representative language. See Jones 248-50. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: California UP, 1978). For summaries of this theory see, *inter alia*, Hirsch 131-5; Buss 113; Clifford Friedman 35-8.

emphasis on mutuality and nurture rather than exclusive self-promotion.⁹⁴ Chodorow's text thus forms a backdrop to my earlier assertion that women writers frequently defy the trope of the integrated, independent self institutionalised by a patriarchal canon. In a countervailing gesture, the unfamiliar treatment of identity and relationships by literary women negates the universalising power of accepted cultural paradigms.

In an appropriation of Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory to a feminist critical agenda, Bella Brodzki hypothesises that the author's mother is the motivating force of women's autobiographies:

[e]mblematic of the way language itself obscures and reveals, withholds and endows, prohibits and sanctions, the mother in each text hovers from within and without. Still powerful and now inaccessible (literally or figuratively), she is the pre-text for the daughter's autobiographical project.⁹⁵

I use the term pre/text in this chapter to illustrate the dual imaging of the mother as autobiographical pretext (impetus) and pre-text, or representative of an antecedent female tradition. The female autobiographical project, then, strains towards the mother as symbol of a primary symbiosis upon which the father has intruded. In a radical upheaval of both Freudian and Lacanian theories, the mother is aligned with language as the elusive signified,⁹⁶ (m)Other, or the pretext for utterance. Lacan predicates the Other which is at once the Unconscious and its drive towards entry into the Symbolic (masculine mastery, and language which legislates for such social engineering).⁹⁷ Thus, the child perceives in the father:

a new dimension of the human condition in that it is not only the man who speaks, but that in man and through man it speaks, that his nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material...⁹⁸

However, within the Chodorovian framework, language and the heterosexual economy become the *obstacles* to maintenance of the relation of mother and

⁹⁴ Judith Kegan Gardiner summarises Chodorow in, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", *Critical Inquiry* 8:2 (Winter 1981) 352.

⁹⁵ Brodzki, "Mothers" 245-6.

⁹⁶ Cf. Lacan. 285, in which Lacan states the phallus as the transcendental signifier.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid 284.

female child.⁹⁹ As a parallel, women writers must circumnavigate alienating masculine pre-texts in order to recover and join 'a quite different literary subculture, even ... a different history'.¹⁰⁰ Sylvia Ashton-Warner illustrates the deconstructive potential of such a matrilineal inheritance upon alienating social discourses when she 'finds for the first time in my life the story of a woman written by a woman and understood by a woman. The shock was like the crack of a branch splitting'.¹⁰¹

To continue my analysis of Brodzki's statement, in addition to her potential as literary precedent, the mother is the literal pre-text for any autobiographical work. She is the precursor to the onset of language, the primary object desired by the Unconscious. As Brodzki continues:

[I]ndeed, [the] autobiographical narratives [of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf] ... are generated out of a compelling need to enter into discourse with the absent or distant mother. As the child's first significant Other, the mother *engenders* subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love.¹⁰²

This extract highlights the dilemma in which my New Zealand writers locate themselves. The mother as primary caregiver initiates the child into identity and narrative, yet simultaneously displays the cultural allocation of gender roles. Particularly in the narratives of Frame and Hyde, the resultant positioning of ambivalence may be summarised as a contemporaneous love of the mother and rejection of the devalued occupation of motherhood which she represents, or a 'personal' versus 'positional' schism.¹⁰³ Helen Buss terms the trope a 'negative identification pattern',¹⁰⁴ usually comprising an empathy with the mother as victim. A poignant example occurs in *To the Is-Land*, where Janet Frame analyses the love-hate dilemma of her adolescent narrator:

⁹⁹ Chodorow 97 locates this first divergence in male and female children in the pre-Oedipal stage: '[t]he content of a girl's attachment to her mother differs from a boy's precisely in that it is not at this time oedipal (sexualised, focussed on possession, which means focussed on someone clearly different and opposite). The preoedipal attachment of daughter to mother continues to be concerned with early mother-infant relational issues'.

¹⁰⁰ See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 45.

¹⁰¹ Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *I Passed This Way* (Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1980) 127. Future references to the primary texts in this chapter will be parenthetically included in the body of the text with the following abbreviations: Janet Frame's *An Autobiography: Is-Land* = *To the Island*, *Angel* = *An Angel at my Table*, *Mirror* = *The Envoy from Mirror City*; Robin Hyde: *Home* = *A Home in this World*; Sylvia Ashton-Warner: *Passed* = *I Passed this Way*.

¹⁰² Brodzki "Mothers" 245-6.

¹⁰³ Kegan Gardiner 356.

¹⁰⁴ Buss 142.

I had begun to hate her habit of waiting hand and foot, martyrlike, upon her family. When I was eager to do things for myself, Mother was always there, anxious to serve. I now felt the guilt of it, and I hated her for being the instrument of that guilt (*Is-Land*, 129).

We may clarify the conflict as being between promotion of the independent self and fear of inheriting socially subordinate roles. As I stated in Chapter One, for women the path towards identity formation encounters unavoidable stereotypes of 'woman' and appropriate female activity. In Frame's autobiography, the mother serves as a constant reminder of socially binding gender tasks, and of the prerequisite personality traits of passivity and selflessness. Her mother's life thus becomes the target for the narrator's disapprobation of cultural conventions, and an eventual removal of her body from the text.

In addition to their function as catalysts in the narrators' encounter with identity formulation, these autobiographical mothers influence the passage towards subjectivity, or the discursive 'I'. The mother is outlined as the source of language and story, yet serves typically as the site of *silenced* narrative. Distancing from the mother is exacerbated because the maternal role poses a threat to each narrator's vocational choice of writing. In this manner, Frame's frustration with her mother is an unfair displacement of the fear inculcated by her mother's imposed sacrifice, 'whose overwhelming might-have-been was the publication of a book' (*Is-Land*, 76). Frame's recollection achieves pathos due to the realisation that the mother's single means of transcendence of role parameters is refuge in the mythical land of literature:

[a]ware now that Mother had turned increasingly to poetry for shelter, *as I was doing*, I, with an unfeelingness based on misery of feeling, challenged the worth of some of her beloved poets, aware that my criticism left her flushed and unhappy while I felt a savage joy at her distress (*Is-Land*, 129. Emphasis added).

This 'misery of feeling' is more aptly read as an empathy which must be repressed. In other words, the daughter criticises her mother because she anticipates a repetition of her mother's situation in a future sacrifice of literature to domesticity.

Yet, to recall the double edge of the epigraph to this thesis, Frame's mother is also predicated as the nourishing force behind her daughter's

formation of language, love of literature, and literary imagination. Throughout childhood, she 'told stories, following the example of mother, who also composed poems and stories' (*Is-Land*, 14). The narrator's initiation into the world is not through human contact, but via the endless reservoir of fictional characters supplied by her mother:

in a tally of people I had known, those of fiction (and of the past and distance that transformed them into a kind of fiction - ancestors, relatives, rulers, Eliza, Simon Legree, Jack Frost, the Gypsies, Wee Willie Winkie, the Babes in the Wood, bogies and pixies and fairies) and the people in songs and in fantasy exceeded those of flesh and blood... (*Is-Land* 18).

As a child, therefore, the narrator makes no distinction between the worlds of fiction and reality. As her identity, subjectivity and relationship to language have not been exposed to social forces outside the immediate self-sufficient environment of the family, she feels reassured that 'I was the world' (*Is-Land*, 13).

Interestingly, Frame's father purchases her first blank book in which to 'write down more poems' (*Is-Land*, 66). As the narrator recalls, '[t]he prospect of having a real notebook and being able to write poems, with numbered pages and an index, made us dizzy with delight' (67). Although the entire family environment is conducive to reading and relaying stories and songs, the father is the officiator of such activity. That he represents a legitimating influence upon the narrator's attempts to write is supported by the transformation of natural activity into a cultural paradigm: 'making up my mind to be a "poet" when I "grew up", I began to write poems regularly in my small railway notebook' (73). As I shall illustrate in Chapter Four, Frame's narrator constantly wraps herself in culturally proffered myths which obstruct her genuine purpose. Thus, the defining label of 'poet' distracts her from the actual writing of poetry, and her mother's method of naturalised learning is replaced by the more structured, educational approach underlying her father's gift of the notebook. Ironically, also, the social definitions of 'poet' and 'maturity' are made mutually exclusive for a woman, a realisation which the author subtly weaves into the syntax of this extract.

Robin Hyde's fear of a repeated maternal self-sacrifice also focuses her mother's wasted literary talent. The bulk of *A Home in this World* illicitly rebels against the mother, yet the denouement indicates that such sentiment has an anterior complexity. This ending consists of a verbal isferral of the plot of a short story from mother to daughter. The mother's

discourse and deportment indicate that she wishes to speak vicariously through her comparatively liberated daughter:

'[y]ou write it. I couldn't. Besides, I never get the time. Housework...'. She shrugged her shoulders, shaking off housework and unwritten things (*Home*, 101).

This gesture is received as symbolically as it is given, as the daughter 'kept it locked up in a little leather writing-case, whose gold key I eventually lost' (101). The interchange of the narrative indicates a matrilineal continuum of identity and story, yet one which is stored rather than openly utilised. The heritage of the mother is thus twofold; she is a teller of stories of *silence* that the daughter wishes to learn from, yet ultimately reject. This final chapter is aptly titled 'Letting Go'. The narrator as daughter can only achieve a separate identity from the mother by simultaneously accepting the *difference* permitted by socio-historical circumstance and the potential of gen(d)erically imposed *sameness* that the mother represents.

This episode signposts a diagnosis, if not a prescription, to the conflict which Hyde's narrator has experienced throughout her life. Rebelling against a society which would name her 'unwed mother' rather than writer/journalist, the Hyde persona feels trapped between two worlds, her own and that of her mother:

[i]t seems to me now that I am caught in the hinge of a slowly-opening door, between one age and another. Beneath the tradition of respectability, which was very strong in my household and had cut me off from all real family love the moment I infringed it, and the new age, as foretold by Nietzsche and some others (*Home*, 28).

The counterpoint to the domestic heritage is liberation which, pertinently, is promoted and proven through the writing of literature. The narrator yearns for the artistic and philosophical freedom enjoyed by celebrated male writers such as Nietzsche. Yet crucially, it is her mother who tries to impose suffocating social labels upon her, as the following dialogue indicates:

'You can't guess what news I've had today.'
Mother said quickly, 'You're going to get married.'
'Oh, no I'm not. Nothing about marriage. But I've got a job, a decent job. Look at that. I'm going to Auckland.'
Mother read the unfolded telegram. She was glad enough ... From then onwards, I was somebody in the house (*Home*, 76).

This new approval sealed by the acquirement of a regular job, if not the *preferable* outcome of marriage, contrasts with the narrator as former outcast in her home. Spurred by resentment of the relative freedom enjoyed by her daughter and protection of her family's social reputation, Hyde's mother constantly undermines her sense of identity:

[a]bsence hadn't made Mother's heart grow so very much fonder, but seemingly the less volume there was of me, the easier she could bear it, with a sort of grudging, coming-round affection (*Home*, 73).

Although this mother constantly pushes her offspring towards brilliance in the public sphere, she is still victim to the social dictates concerning the daughter as bartering commodity. As the text has indicated, the prestige acquired through public success is a desirable beaten yet one which is supplanted by the ideal of a respectable marriage. The mother therefore views her daughter, who gains weight in an instinctive rebellion against socially defined sexual attractiveness, as a devalued possession.

Nancy Chodorow proposes that the love/hate dichotomy of the female child towards her mother is reflected in the mother's parallel attitude towards her daughter:

a girl alternates between total rejection of a mother who represents infantile dependence and attachment to her, between identification with anyone other than the mother and feeling herself her mother's double and extension. Her mother often doubles her preoccupations.¹⁰⁵

In Hyde's case, the mother ostensibly wishes to promote a continuation of her own life in the desire to marry off her daughter. Yet the matrilineal passing of the narratives, and the ultimate reconciliation of the mother with the fact of her daughter's illegitimate child, hint at a more complex composite of maternal love. The mother is trapped amidst conflicting ideologies which are the diverse products of social conditioning and personal frustration, and fails to ever fully acknowledge the *separateness* of her daughter's identity, activity, and justification for narrative discourse.

By contrast, Frame's mother accepts her daughter's resentment in a long-suffering yet passive manner. This is not because she is any less embedded in her domestic role but, due to the extreme poverty of the Frame family, is less sensitive to social expectations and judgments. Thus, when the

¹⁰⁵ Chodorow 138.

narrator arrives home from University 'infuriated' by the 'ignorance of [her] parents' (*Angel*, 160), her mother is bewildered, yet 'self-effacing, maintain[s] her role of provider of food, peacemaker, poet' (159). As I have discussed, Frame's autobiographical recollection achieves genuine pathos through the juxtaposition of an adolescent's barely understood need to hurt the mother, and the adult recognition that this resentment is inculcated by the socialised pressures acting upon her mother, and potentially upon the daughter.

The autobiographies of both Frame and Hyde display a complex interrelationship between mother and daughter, which is never resolved despite the clarifying perspective of recollection. As I have suggested, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way* reveals a less ambivalent response to the mother and the trope of motherhood. In this text, the narrator responds to her mother as an unmitigatedly positive role model, appreciating her example of artistic and physical liberation:

[m]ost places where we lived Mumma inadvertently provided us with two kinds of freedom: spiritual and topographical, in the forms of a piano and a horse (*Passed*, 21).

Sylvia's family is displayed as an 'incubator of culture' (60), and a place of 'true learning' (22). This metaphor is epitomised by an alignment between the domestic environment and the process of autobiographical writing:

[t]hese pictures on the screen of memory they move like shadows of leaves in the wind patterning on the grass, impermanently fleeting. This one here, now that one there, forming impressionistically yet cohering in a common theme. A theme indigenous to the family nucleus centred in the kitchen (*Passed*, 64).

Memory and its constituent images are imaged as both fluid and transient, yet with a common base that is the author's mind. The suggestion is that Ashton-Warner's narrative technique is inspired by the family locus, in which the dual dynamic of change and stability is inherent. Far from rejecting the image of domesticity for one of artistic freedom, the narrator learns of their compatibility in her mother's kitchen.

This mutuality of home and literature achieves clearer focus in the metaphor of the kitchen table which, again, is intimately associated with the mother:

[t]his private life of a kitchen table ... Ink marks where people had signed their names in wistful confirmation of

having passed this way ... Given a chance a kitchen table can be a family diary of no uncertain moment for any who know the code (*Passed*, 60).

Significantly, the author elevates the vocabulary of this familial image to the title of the text. The indication is that, unlike Frame, Ashton-Warner supports a notion of belonging and home which is less nostalgic than continuous. Frame's narrative, by contrast, traces an exponential exile from the mother, the family and a sense of unified, accepted self. The record of Ashton-Warner's life is neither evidence of a passage from family to freedom, or from female domestic bondage to the masculine, public world. Rather, the dual memory of her mother as independent *and* as the nexus of family life remains a touchstone. *I Passed this Way* signs itself into a tradition and history of women's experience, its domestic imagery celebrating continuity between mother and daughter. Accordingly, the narrator's response to her mother's example is an effort at repetition rather than rejection, in her recurrent coordination of individual drives and loving contact with others.

However, Sylvia's relationship with her mother clearly recalls another aspect of Nancy Chodorow's theory, as the mother symbolises the paradox of a constantly present absence. We recall that Chodorow's paradigmatic representation of the mother is as the primary nurturer, with whom exclusive contact is foreclosed by the advent of social roles and competitive relationships with the father and other children. Sylvia's mother is imaged at the front of the family comet formation, forever leading the way yet maintaining a distance that demarcates generational difference and authority (*Passed*, 51-2). The narrator's positioning in the middle of a sprawling family inculcates a feeling of separation from a mother whose attentions are widely dispersed. The result is a lifelong series of 'idealised girls' with which the narrator attempts to overcome the perceived lack (55). As Ashton-Warner perceives:

I sometimes think now that all my idealising of some girl or other was an intuitive search for a mother which continued most of my years ... It is significant to me ... that much later in life when I was curious to get a line on my babyhood and early years, not one of the older ones remembered a thing (*Passed*, 63-4).

Her yearning towards the mother is emphasised by a sensation of being excluded from the family narrative, or from that which psychoanalytical critic

Marianne Hirsch would term 'the family romance'.¹⁰⁶ Again, the influence of the mother and the desire to write autobiography are consciously associated. Yet the passage suggests that one motivation for the discovery of narrative identity is a perceived alienation from the mother. Behind the desire to write autobiographically, then, is a maternally oriented pretext, or a need to inscribe her passage on the familial kitchen table.

Ashton-Warner's maternal kitchen with its private yet familiar history is contrasted starkly with the exterior world of social propriety and public discourse. During adolescence, the narrator experiences a discomfiting split between love of her family, and social dictates concerning respectability and power. The family is deemed socially marginal due to its poverty, a breadwinning mother and a handicapped father. Conscious of these factors, the narrator shamefacedly avoids taking her school friends home. She explicitly links this realisation to a degeneration of her unified identity:

[t]his may well have been the time when the walls of personality began eroding, not only from the traffic between reality and dream but from the wear and tear of feeling ... the walls which enclose you become thinner as you move along, whereas you need strong walls round your personality to prevent the intrusion of the personalities of others. Feeling is so contagious it can penetrate anything (*Passed*, 93).

The experience and its subsequent description evoke the initiation of the child into the Symbolic, or the intrusion of culture upon the nurturing shelter of primary love. The haven of the family which has cultivated dreaming and imagination is invaded by an incipient awareness of social legislation. Just as Frame originally positions herself as/in the world, Ashton-Warner's childhood identity is not constructed as a unitary absolute, but as fully integrated into an accepting familial environment or womb. Once subjected to the onslaught of a social naming system, however, she is forced to erect barriers between self-definition and multiple, often hostile, others. Again, susceptibility to the opinions and emotions of other people is outlined as antagonistic to self-determination and protection, but the narrator aims at conciliation of the two, rather than choice or compromise.

I posited the theory in Chapter One that women's autobiographies portray an atypical sense of self in the context of the patriarchal canon. Ashton-Warner's self-analysis provides evidence of Susan Stanford Friedman's theory of women's inscribed identity as less static and unitary

¹⁰⁶ Hirsch 15.

than those of their male counterparts.¹⁰⁷ Within the Chodorovian paradigm, such a subjectivity reflects the primary bond of mother and daughter, and a latent continuation of permeable ego boundaries until the daughter becomes mother. It is vital, however, to deconstruct essentialist theories such as that of psychologist Erik Erikson, who states that a woman's role as mother encourages the development of a unique inner space designed to recreate the symbiosis of mother and child. Thus, 'a young woman spends adolescence looking for the man through whom she will fulfil herself, and the maturational stages of identity and intimacy are conflated for her'.¹⁰⁸ Socially legislated gender delineations demand that heterosexual, procreative roles be primary for women. Whilst these do appear to be genuine desires for Ashton-Warner, both her recurring 'crushes' on other women and the continuity of her artistic ambitions suggest alternative potential means of fulfilment. For her, the drive towards self-definition cannot be fulfilled merely through relationship with a masculine other. As I shall elaborate in Chapter Three, intimacy and self-development are defined less as interchangeable than as conflicting options that can ideally be coordinated.

Ashton-Warner follows the example of her mother in attempting to reconcile all elements of woman and artist into an eclectic whole. Janet Frame and Robin Hyde, however, choose emotional and sexual reclusivity, or the sacrifice of relationship to self-sufficiency. For both writers, such a resolution is encouraged by an increasing sense of invisibility, incurred through confrontation with social definitions of desirable behaviour, discourse and appearance. Frame's means of recourse to such deterioration is the sublimation of emotional and sexual desires into literature, or an immersion of identity in narrative. Hyde likewise removes herself to solitary and fringe *milieux* because society denies the reality of an unwed, literary mother. Her recurrent cravings for contact with the outside world and an eventual suicide suggest that Hyde does not attain such a transformative solution as Frame, but also that Hyde is more realistically aware of the situational dilemma of the woman writer. Identity and intimacy are not 'conflated' for any of the writers under study, but are more properly defined as mutually exclusive (Hyde), mutually influential (Ashton-Warner), or able to be mutually evaded (Frame).

As a corollary to the formulation of a response to their proper parents, women writers must also negotiate a paternal literary inheritance, and attempt to uncover matrilineal sources of authority for their own experience. As I

¹⁰⁷ Stanford Friedman 38.

¹⁰⁸ Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, 1959) 116.

predicated at the commencement of this chapter, Ashton-Warner's discovery of fiction by women is tantamount to an apocalyptic revelation. She images this experience in terms of a denuding of the patriarchal woman, and a re/dressing of her in womanmade clothes: As she queries in horror, '[w]hat were women written of by men but men's ideas of women dressed up?' (*Passed* 127). The text in question is Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*, which reveals the same technical tendency as Ashton-Warner's narrative to express desire in images of the natural landscape and through pathetic fallacy.¹⁰⁹ Janet Frame responds differently to the same text, romanticising her own experience as outsider through association with the "plain Jane" stereotype (*Is-Land*, 127). Her narrator empathises most clearly with "background" characters, 'watching, listening':

I was not Becky Sharp; I was Emma. Yet I was also Tess and Mary South, as I had once been Anne of Green Gables and Charlotte Brönte ... I was Maggie Tulliver and Jane Eyre and Cathy ... (*Is-Land*, 127).

Yet characteristically, the referent for Frame is Literature rather than literary *female* experience, so that 'when I could find no heroine to become, I was myself simply adoring the heroes' (127). In general, her narrator is loyal to the socially dispossessed or 'all the outcast victims of misfortune', rather than to women as a marginalised group (34). Yet she does gain a certain degree of comfort from female texts about women who express the alienation and suffocation of discourse which she experiences.

Integral to Frame's denial of her mother's role, character and silenced poetry is a rejection of her mother's literature:

I knew of few New Zealand writers, only Katherine Mansfield, Eileen Duggan, William Pember Reeves, Thomas Bracken, all of whom I thought of as 'belonging' to my mother, and because I did not want to think of myself as belonging to her world, I had no desire to share 'her' writers (*Is-Land*, 129).

This passage is crucial in its correlation of the female parent and the literature of the narrator's motherland. The narrator subsequently re-discovers New Zealand literature, and again couches her opinion in familial terms:

¹⁰⁹ For a detailed analysis of Ashton-Warner's technique of displaced desire, see Chapter Three of this thesis.

[i]t was almost a feeling of having been an orphan who discovers that her parents are alive and living in the most desirable home - pages of prose and poetry (*Angel*, 113).

The consistency of imagery suggests that Frame's new affiliation to her native literature is linked to an acceptance of her mother, and a new awareness of her personal heritage. Again, however, personal relationships and familial identity are supplanted by an overriding loyalty to literature, and a defence of New Zealand writing as marginal discourse. The narrator aims to deconstruct centralised cultural narratives - in this case that of a paternal colonial heritage - yet she fails to exclusively align such activity with a feminist agenda.

Indeed, Frame's narrative is consistently asexual in its refusal to extrapolate personal experience into a transgressive *women's* poetics. Of the three texts under analysis, *An Autobiography* provides the clearest example of the peripheralisation of the female body and women's sexuality. Yet, as I posited in my introductory chapter, such banishment is consistent throughout all three of these autobiographies. In the context of maternal subtexts, the dynamic driving such marginalisation is twofold. As Sandra Lee Bartky states, '[o]ur identities can no more be kept separate from how our bodies look than they can be kept separate from the shadow selves of the female stereotypes'.¹¹⁰ That is, the female body acts as a reminder of feared maternity and, as I have emphasised, the sacrifice of individual desires. And *unruly* female sexuality must be bound by the inherited cultural straitjacket which is often imposed by the mother. On the first point, I cite Janet Frame who instinctively recoils from the implications of marriage:

[a]nd my writing? In a future where I was never alone, where I worked all day picking grapes, caring for children, cooking for my family ... how could I ever be alone again, able to enter that world of the imagination to explore it and try to describe it? ... in a world where the cherubs cried and wet their nappies, where bunches of grapes moved and grew and must be picked ... where dimly lit rooms with all their wonderful play of light and shadow must be lived in, cleaned and repaired and made weatherproof (*Mirror*, 362).

This passage deromanticises the cultural myth of woman's essential role as a series of domestic tasks. Pertinently, this reading of marriage and maternity is indoctrinated by the experience of her mother's self-sacrifice.

¹¹⁰ Sandra Lee Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression", *Philosophy and Women*, eds. Sharon Bishop and Marjorie Weinzig, (Belmont, 1979) 38.

An equally evocative example resides in Hyde's *A Home in this World*, in which a reminder of the dangers of motherhood subsists in a cipher of female despair named Eve. Placed in the text as a fictional device, the pregnant Eve has eyes that are 'too scared' and a demeanour that has of necessity 'grown stealthy, her helpless blue glance sliding away from me' (*Home* 47, 44). She serves as a portentous symbol of woman's fall at the hands of man, and thus a shadow who haunts Hyde as a reminder of her own unwed pregnancy. Yet her suffering also reverses the cultural myth of the woman-directed Fall.

This chapter has examined the influence of mothers and matrilineal heritage upon autobiographical constructions of identity. The assertion of each narrator of her simultaneous sameness and difference from her mother challenges the paradigms of experience which are expressed through patriarchal systems. As Kegan Gardiner summarises:

[o]ften [women writers] communicate a consciousness of their identity through paradoxes of sameness and difference - from other women, especially their mothers; from men; and from social injunctions for what women should be, including those inscribed in the literary canon.¹¹¹

Towards such negotiation, women writers frequently manipulate narrative strategy in order to try out diverse identity masks. This technique facilitates their attempts to reconcile or choose amongst contradictory drives. Therefore, the persona(e) of a woman's text serves as palimpsest upon which the author as *mother* traces alternative possibilities of a new, re-created self. Judith Kegan Gardiner propounds that:

we can approach a text with the hypothesis that its female author is engaged in a process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from many imaginative possibilities. That is, the woman writer uses her text, particularly her centring on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character. Thus, the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author.¹¹²

An excellent opportunity for application of this paradigm is presented by Janet Frame's *An Autobiography* which traces the progression through various social and personal myths (rebirths) of self. This constitutes a weaving

¹¹¹ Kegan Gardiner 354.

¹¹² Ibid 157.

between predominant cultural myths about women, in an attempt to reconcile personal integrity with social acceptability.¹¹³ Such a theory promotes an alternative interpretation of women's autobiographies to that of a progression toward some unified or transcendent self. Rather, as I indicated in my introductory chapter, through mothering a text the woman writer not only provides alternatives to biological procreation, but initiates her own *re/naissance*. To expand upon the binary nature of this concept, she renames herself and her personal experience in terms which are more appropriate than those superimposed by the dominant discourse, and recaptures a women's discourse which has been historically annulled.

In the arena of autobiographical writing, the relationship between author and narrator is restated as personal due to the generic aim of self-portrayal. Autobiography disputes the general literary trend by revalorising the persona(e) as the part-true, part-fictional displacement of the author. These autobiographical identities are also a product of memory. Such a process may successfully review various versions of self, discarding those created by others or by social mechanisms.¹¹⁴ Yet the urge to fictionalise must not be entirely overlooked, particularly in contemporary autobiographies such as Frame's in which self-reflexivity is a paramount aim. Generally speaking, the autobiographical identity is at once written and read by its author,¹¹⁵ and the decision to publish is surely relevant to what aspects of self (if any) s/he chooses to disclose.

As always, the input of the reader into the autobiographical contract must not be overlooked. The readerly stance of women towards female protagonists of autobiography is as complicated as that of the authorial position. Just as the female narrators in these texts respond ambivalently to their mothers, women as readers will react to the protagonists of maternal texts with a mixture of empathy and disapproval. This dynamic is accentuated where the reader perceives such personae as victims. Kegan Gardiner elaborates, pinpointing socio-historical difference as an influential factor in such response:

[a]lthough we readers do not want to be like these women, we are forced to recognize that we are or could be like them in similar circumstances. We become angry, then, both at the women and at their oppressors.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ This theme is the basis for discussion in Chapter Five of this thesis.

¹¹⁴ Kegan Gardiner 358-9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 359.

¹¹⁶ Kegan Gardiner 358.

Hence, in counterpoint to the authorial position, women readers as *daughters* encounter the precedent of their literary mothers in a study of women's autobiography. The autobiographer reflects a complex and difficult familial relation with her narrator/s, and the woman reader repeats this writerly process by forging a correspondingly intimate yet problematic bond with the female protagonists of autobiography. As Irigaray says, these women's testimonies influence us not only because they rebel against their socio-historical circumstances, but because they remain largely unread. Yet the inter-changeable roles displayed between author, persona/e and reader bear witness to a women's poetics of continuity and communality.

Coordination and the Covert Narrative: Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way*

I posed the query in the introductory chapter to this thesis as to what forms of solution or catharsis are available to women in their encounter with traditional roles, stereotypical relationships, patriarchal images of the body, and canonical expectations. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed This Way* is an excellent example of outspoken rebellion against conventional dictates regarding women's roles. The distinguishing characteristic in this text, however, is a symbolically loaded subtext which strategically allows a *covert* transgression of the boundaries of the proper. As I discussed in Chapter Two, this disguised narrative is motivated in part by a maternal pre/text. Its symbolic patterning reveals the desire for both a matrilineal contextualisation of the self (the kitchen table), and for the literal mother (displaced love for other women).

Yet Ashton-Warner's autobiography offers a more replete representation of the coveted (m)Other. I summarised in the last chapter that the peripheral positioning of female sexuality in all of my chosen texts is related to a rejection of biological determinism, as dictated by women's social disenfranchisement and as represented in the victim mentality of the authors' mothers. Due to the relatively univalent positioning of Sylvia's persona towards her mother, the textual response to her own body and its desires is less one of banishment than of submergence. Although maternity threatens self-fulfilment in other spheres, her mother provides a benchmark for a *coordination* of, rather than selection between, contradictory drives and desires. *I Passed this Way* provides the clearest example of Teresa de Lauretis's proposal of a deconstructive dynamic which speaks through the seams and fissures of a traditional structure.¹¹⁷ That is, Ashton-Warner's narrative exploits conventional imagery, symbolism and structure through a double discourse, which underlines its femaleness even as it attempts to seduce the legislators of social and literary propriety.

Towards this end, Ashton-Warner engages in a complicated negotiation of the meanings of inside and outside as represented by the terms 'natural' and 'cultural'. Such an interlocation occurs on two levels, the most obvious being the narrator's protean relationship with her physical

De Lauretis, *Technologies* 35.

locale. This consists of a progression through natural and cultural environments in which the narrator feels either alienated or comfortable, and by which she is either accepted or rejected. The second and more strategic stratum is psychological, comprising a narrative dialogue or argument between that which the narrator presents as her interior or 'natural' self and her culturally imposed personae. Ashton-Warner's narrative consistently illustrates what Susan Stanford Friedman terms the 'dual consciousness' of the female narrative voice, or the constant arbitration between 'the self as culturally defined and the self as different from social prescription'.¹¹⁸ And, in a combination of the two techniques, *I Passed This Way* allows the interior, barely sensed consciousness to speak by displacing tropes of desire and destruction on to images of the natural environment. The seeming romanticisation of nature, therefore, is more accurately described as a discursive technology or alternative myth system,¹¹⁹ through which the author subtly achieves the coordination of conformity and dissension, personal probity and publication.

In the nostalgic tracing of a child of nature gradually bound about by social roles and rules, *I Passed This Way* epitomises the transition from innocence to experience. To Ashton-Warner's retrospective eye, entry into the cultural or social world of New Zealand necessitates suffocation in 'the stale air beneath the crinoline over the country'.¹²⁰ Yet the passage of this lengthy narrative reveals more symbolic density than is credited by a simplistic reading of the countryside as positive signifier and town as negative. Within an overarching frame of ambiguity, the depths of the New Zealand countryside represent both the incubation of personality, and a living burial created by the removal of the narrator from a *milieu* of intellectual vitality. Concurrently, the natural environment reflects a child's unconscribed body image, and a potentially unashamed sexuality, yet is read with fear by an adult Ashton-Warner as her conscription to the essentialist womanhood of maternity.

This ambivalence towards nature is epitomised in the trope of the sea which pervades *I Passed This Way*, signifying an unbounded freedom which is at once exhilarating and terrifying. For all of the women in this study, the concept of autonomy (which we may define as intellectual, economic and sexual self-determination) is an ideal, yet one which is both radical and

¹¹⁸ Stanford Friedman 39.

¹¹⁹ De Lauretis, *Technologies* 35.

¹²⁰ Ashton-Warner 112. Subsequent references will be parenthetically included in the body of the text.

frightening in its transgression of cultural codes. In addition, the attainment of such an objective suggests the sacrifice of heartfelt or socially imposed aspirations such as love, marriage and children. Conflicting desires, despite an awareness of the coercive factor of social conditioning, are a genuine source of anguish. As the narrator expresses in her early twenties, the artist's dream:

increasingly featured austerity and asceticism and there was no man in it. Yet, prospering side by side with this, was another the very opposite, a new one I hadn't worn before in which I've finally slimmed down, become arrestingly beautiful and wear exotic clothes. I'd meet the man of all men ... the wedding was all. Both dreams were doing well though entirely unrelated to each other (158-9).

At the threshold of adulthood, the narrator is poised between the Utopian fantasy of the artist and the cultural romantic myth in which beauty is the bartering tool, a dichotomous pressure which is the dynamic of her reality and narrative. And, as C.K. Stead notes, 'everything fostered one and obstructed the other',¹²¹ in the form of social expectations relegating woman to the relative roles of wife and mother rather than promoting her individual autonomy.

The interrelationship between social (exterior) and personal (interior) images of self is rooted in, and often paralleled by, the changing bond between the narrator and her physical surroundings. Ashton-Warner's childhood is characterised by a strong affinity with the natural environment of limitless space and physical exuberance. Intervals in cities such as Christchurch are remembered in terms of 'dark cold corridors like tunnels with steps and stairs and hundreds of children', as opposed to 'when we came out into the clear at Umataroa ... a spread of green out in the country ... [it] was like coming home again' (21). A stereotypical paradigm is thus drawn in which the massive scale of nature is paralleled by the child's lack of body limits. In the city, she feels cloistered, not only by the presence of buildings and crowds, but by the reign of social instead of natural laws. As I discuss throughout this thesis, an empathic bond with the natural environment is often posited by women writers as an alternative to cultural confinement in the form of static role options. Nature is also recurrently associated with the female, as

Carl K. Stead, "Sylvia Ashton-Warner: Living on the Grand", *In the Glass Case: Essays by New Zealand Writers*, ed. C. K. Stead (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1981) 54.

the precursor to acculturation, or the nurturing maternal womb before the onslaught of the law-of-the-father.

Such escapism, however, is necessarily mediated by conflictual drives toward human bonding and a sense of social acceptance. For Ashton-Warner, therefore, the city soon becomes a multi-faceted symbol. This is evidenced by the narrator's fascination with the railway station in Napier. Here, she first becomes aware of the dramatic quality of movement and noise, and begins to participate vicariously in the lives of multitudinous others:

I was enthralled at the drama there ... The comings and goings of people, the glad greetings and kisses when the long train puffed steaming to a stop, the talk of luggage and interaction, the urgent bell ringing to warn the travellers of the train's imminent departure and suddenly the change to partings and tears ... I'd lurk, loiter, linger in that place looking up widely about me, intensely agog; absorbing the flashing exposed emotions, compulsively living through them, catching them myself contagiously (36-7).

Her sense of the implied elsewhere of the train's destination lays a foundation for her later urge towards physical freedom and change. Conversely, the vividly evocative image of the station may represent a reconstruction of events, in order to foreshadow the narrator's professed urge toward city life. Thus, the anchor memory of the railway station is set up in order to foreshadow her later reaction to Auckland: '[w]hat a language, the crash and bang and boom of the traffic, assuring me that I was no longer entombed in the silence of the country but at large in the vortex of living. Elixir itself' (220).

Consequently, at times the thematic of 'country as freedom' is mediated by its default representation of incarceration, speechlessness and an absence of cultural inspiration. From the vantage point of inscription, the author reflects upon the 'catalytic impact on one buried alive in the New Zealand forests' of realising that she is 'a vagabond and an artist' (307). In a return to the prevailing thematic, she claims that the unfettered journeys in nature rather than society fostered the rich repository of imagery in her writer's mind. Of her adolescent rides to school she muses:

[t]he road was rich in unprofitable ways, in the blood of ideas. My solitary mind was a boundless scape full of the things I wanted ... Those profligate times at least exercised the imagery which tends to wither in more fortunate circumstances. You are as alive as you mind is, and your mind as alive as the imagery is. So you couldn't really say it was lonely on the road... (101).

In an immediate contrast, she contrasts the scene with her first taste of 'pariahdom' at school:

but you could say it was lonely at school where I'd slid out from the company of the chosen to the sisterhood of the untouchables (101).

This sense of cultural disapproval and exclusion is one which is to shadow the narrator's adult life. Once again, the superimposition of repeated sensations and events upon foundational impressions such as the above serves as a cohering device across the recollected life. The narrator's school experience is to be repeated in various institutions throughout her life, particularly those pertaining to the education system, or that which she names 'The Permanent Solid Block of Male Educational Hostility' (356).

The opposite pulls of nature and culture are one intersection in a life characterised by a series of crossroads, all of which represent the choices available to a woman both diversely talented and consistently restricted. In her teacher training years, the young Sylvia is transfixed by a revolving mirror-light which she sees as a symbol of a 'many-faceted mind' such as her own (191). Yet possession of the spherical wholeness of the light is deferred by the continuous clash of artist and socially defined woman throughout her life. This problematic nexus is exacerbated by the dilemma of which native artistic talent is to have priority in her life - painting, music or writing. Concurrently, in the arena of the woman, sexual and emotional desire combat, at least implicitly, with loyalty and duty. A vivid example occurs when Sylvia kisses Hilton Morris or 'Pan' on the beach:

[h]e dismounts, so I do too, and immediately we kiss in the greatest relief, standing on the wet sand by the waves, communicating the tumult you find in music ... I'm thinking, It's different from Keith and me, 'For better, for worse, till death do us part'; it's the other violent variety 'under the hide of me ... a hungry yearning inside of me'. But we chat of surface things (318).

It is noteworthy that the narrative voice parallels the contrast between Pan and Keith with the difference between music and conventional dictates. The text constantly asserts a division between inner and outer selves, or between the socially acceptable and the improper alternatives of passion, art and freedom.

However, it is not only fear of social recrimination that informs the narrator's choice of fidelity to her husband. The recurrent conflict of desires

which inhabit and inhibit Ashton-Warner are stoutly policed by a socially indoctrinated morality. As she says:

[w]e've touched. But no man is going to walk this earth to look back and say, Her? Huh ... I've had *her*. Not outside a marriage. To hold his love I must deny it (319).

The incident and its subsequent narration are an apposite example of the complexity of Sylvia's sexual self. Whilst making a show of autonomy by denying possession of herself by a man, she is simultaneously subscribing to the commodifying value placed upon women and their chastity. As the writer realises when describing her courtship years, 'society put a value on its girls, *as girls*, at that time' (157, emphasis added). The ambiguous noun 'value' highlights the double-edge of the social machinery. Underpinning the laws and mores created to promote marriage and the nuclear family lies a cultural system of self-perpetuating propaganda. In other words, society euphemises sexist political policy under the guise of a compliment to women's higher morality.

In addition to the narrator's attraction to Pan is her magnetism towards her female friend Opal. This relationship is vaguely defined and textually minimised, yet stands in marked counterpoint to that of her marriage. At its most intense she finds it 'impossible sometimes to meet the requirements of two homes across the road from each other' (302). Yet, in general, the two relationships balance each other, revealing both the generosity of the narrator's emotional capacity and the multiple nature of her needs:

[t]hree loves: my husband, a woman, a lover. Plenty of room. By my reckoning there was a place for two men in a woman's life simultaneously and most certainly for a woman too ... rather than overlapping they complemented one another... (326).

Opal is the apotheosis of Ashton-Warner's crushes on 'idealised girls' (63). As I discussed in Chapter Two, other women serve as a symbolic catchment in *Passed this Way* for the narrator's frustrated desire towards a positively influential yet distant mother. The character of Opal is closely associated with the mother through the use of adjectives such as 'enigmatic' and 'accessible' (297, 301). She is also distinctly positioned in relative authority to the narrator, who constantly strives to please her:

Opal's unmistakable indifference reminds me that my work is sentimental and representational (301).

I am learning the hard way that praise from Opal seldom takes the form of words (302).

The occasion instigating each comment is an artistic gift to Opal and, more particularly, an effort at rendering the female form, first in a clay sculpture and then in a portrait of her friend. The narrator wishes, therefore, to both give love and receive approval in a context of women's poetics, or a substitutive female form of communicative solidarity. The balancing of this relationship with that of her husband reveals a subjectivity grounded in dichotomy, or one which attempts to straddle a conventional reality and a sensed female alternative. Yet the catharsis that she seeks in Opal, and displays through her narrative subtext, is a satisfactory *unifying* of, rather than choice between, diverse desires. As such, the Opal/Keith/Pan triptych parallels her lifelong juggling act between art, teaching and family, and between passionate and proper selves.

Susan Stanford Friedman's theory of women's permeable ego boundaries of women is highly applicable to *I Passed This Way*. The narrator constantly defines herself in a context of others, and repeatedly forecloses on unmitigated individuality. As the previous paragraph suggests, her aim is more a coordination of eclectic personal pleasures than a sacrifice of, for example, love for artistic freedom. Critic Mary Mason concurs with Stanford Friedman that a woman's sense of self characteristically exists within a context of a deep awareness of others, as opposed to traditional male autobiographies such as that of Rousseau in which 'characters and events exist only to become part of the landscape of the hero's self-discovery'.¹²² In *I Passed this Way*, the interplay that occurs and recurs between the narrator and her satellite characters is presented as mutually profitable. This is appropriate to Mason's extrapolation that recognition of another, or plural, consciousness(es) does not characteristically destroy a woman's sense of self.¹²³

When such other-oriented self-definition is limited to the context of an imbalanced power relationship such as traditional marriage, however, a woman's sense of self can be severely handicapped in its drive towards expression and self-fulfilment. In the case of Ashton-Warner, the

Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Greed (eds), *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women* (London: G. K. Hall, 1979) xiv.
Mason 207-8.

autobiographical subtext provides ample evidence of conflict between an omnipresent marriage and resurfacing, unfulfilled desires. Ashton-Warner makes explicit reference to the fact that the greatest threat to her marriage stems not from the intrusion of a human other, but from the Other which is her Unconscious, embodied as the artistic drive. In retrospect, the narrator perceives that various forms of art allowed her a release mechanism from the traditional ties of wife and mother, or a way in which her 'unruly native imagery found a channel through which to surface' (347). It is pertinent that she applies the same adjective 'unruly' as Elaine Showalter in her theoretical model of the excessive, non-conformist part of the female lived or written experience which is continuously marginalised by a defensive moral majority.¹²⁴ In the case of Ashton-Warner, the disorderly nature of the artistic drive which comprises part of the woman increasingly conflicts with the social role which is 'wife', an identity imposed from the outside and prescribing relativity to the male.

The most explicit denial of women's traditionally limiting options is illustrated through the psychosomatic breakdown which occurs in Ashton-Warner's mid-thirties. This collapse is portrayed as a result of the intense suppression of individual dreams which she must maintain in order to fulfil her role as wife:

Unexpectedly the dreams would peer out from their undermind confinement at a line of poetry or the flash of a tune, at a moment in my nightgown on the verandah as the sun flicked the waking ocean, galloping the beach with the wind in my face or at a letter in the mail-bag; dreams of what I had meant to be...They revolted, the dreams, sometimes flooding out, halting my hands folding the nappies so that I found myself staring at them in the evening and wondering what on earth they were (275).

We recognise the refrains of desire echoing throughout this passage, as the narrator invokes literature, music, physical freedom and cultural contact. The breakdown, as the negative flipside to artistic expression, constitutes a release from the psychological exhaustion of coordinating a profession, domestic chores, and inner drives. These dreams are portrayed as an inner energy attempting to break free from suffocation. And concurrently, these troublesome desires are externalised. Yet, as with all of her repressed needs, the dreams are transformed into an outer force which threatens to shatter the circumspect shell of the wife-and-mother persona. As the narrator says to her

¹²⁴ Showalter "Feminist Criticism" 200-1.

nurse, '[m]y dreams are too heavy' (246), fearing the sustained effort which she must maintain in order to keep them obedient and silent.

As I have stated, dreaming and desire are frequently symbolised by the sea, which Sylvia simultaneously fears and longs for:

[a]s I lay in the darkness at night hearing the thud of the breaking waves my dreams had a chance to surface, trying to surge over my mind, but at least I had the strength to counter them, for I was coming to fear them, as I feared almost everything (276).

The dream which she relates to her brother illustrates the psychological tug-of-war which is taking place, and the awareness that her individual needs threaten her relationship with her children:

'It was the sea, Li. So much water in it. The rivers were full of water too. I didn't like them taking Ashton away round that cliff track on a horse. A very narrow clay track crumbling at the edge and at the bottom of the cliff the waves were crashing over the rocks...' (280).

Yet the terror induced by the sea is relative to its signification of freedom. Thus, early in her marriage it is to 'the west wind from the sea' (242) that the narrator runs out of a fear of domestic interment.

Later, when she is widowed, the sea represents both a border inscribing New Zealand's isolation, and a boundless horizon upon which to escape this confinement. Exempt from love for and duty towards a living husband, Sylvia can view the sea in a more straightforward metaphorical sense, stripped of the element of fear because she is no longer bound to deny its pull toward the freedom and autonomy of movement. 'At home', Ashton-Warner can only feel excluded and alienated, a sensation which she describes in terms of physical violence and death:

I was in the wilderness myself, having fallen into the hands of the philistine who, on that high plateau of boundless horizons, had ambushed me and hurled me over a cliff upon the rocks below where I'd broken every bone in my heart (364).

It is not only the 'Permanent Solid Block of Male Educational Hostility' (356) which bars the narrator from a sense of belonging in New Zealand. Ashton-Warner is too outspoken, progressive and assertive about her existence outside of the traditional roles of wife, mother and assistant teacher. It is only in the crossing of the physical line which delineates New Zealand that her narrator feels re-located in an interiority of self which is not divided into

contradictory roles, but in which the woman and the artist can cohabit and be proudly displayed.

In the session of psychoanalysis following her breakdown, the narrator acknowledges those forces which pull her apart through the model which her Doctor draws:

the form of a wagon with two horses, self-preservation and racial preservation; the two heavyweight instincts, fear and sex. One horse was pulling one way and the second horse pulling the other ... He showed me how the greatest instinct, fear, was the horse which was out of hand in my wagon ... and unless I took over firm control I'd quite likely get tipped out (281).

This is a curious reading, and one mired in contemporary social mores. It is evident that the narrator is terrified at this point. She feels buried alive in the remoteness of Horoera, and dreads having to make a choice between personal autonomy and her family. The dialectic of the Unconscious is accepted by her as read by the male doctor. Thus, on the one hand, 'racial preservation' represents reproduction and maternity as biological necessity, and on the other, the narrator faces drowning in this essentialist role of 'woman'. However, I suggest an alternative reading of the narrator's psychological predicament to that of the Doctor, through an interpretation of the 'horse out of hand' as the sexual instinct. The negotiations of self being undertaken at this point are re-crossed by another fear, that of the freedom and pleasure of sexuality *for its own sake*, a drive which Ashton-Warner is to consistently sublimate and to displace throughout her life and, retrospectively, her narrative.

During her courtship years at Teachers College, Sylvia is bouleversed by the concept of physical desire and its manifestations in human contact:

[c]ould it possibly be touch which governed the chance of a long and happy marriage ... or not? The thought had an earthquake quality, rocking the mindscape so that clay banks on the wayside split and crumbled, streams changed course and raw horizons reared (199).

This quotation is a vivid evocation of a trope repeated throughout *I Passed is Way*, which is the image of the mind as a surface beneath which eruptive forces rumble. Later, she is to draw the mindscapes of herself and with as a comparison between the orderly, cohesive nature of her husband's personality and her own, fragmented and disrupted self. It is also

characteristic that the tumultuous undercurrent which is sexuality is aligned with the natural landscape. The violent and dramatic imagery employed underlines the shattering effect of sexuality upon the ordered social image of the female body as merely functional or reproductive.

Despite this acknowledgment of the threatening dynamics of 'touch', subsequent to her marriage sexuality is confined to a near-silence and always displaced. Yet the persistent artistic drive is expressed through a sexual metaphor: '[j]uice had to rise like sap in the spring, the lubricant in making love' (347). This associates the two forces as ones which must be suppressed and silenced in order to maintain the smooth, integrated persona of wife and mother. As further evidence, the natural landscapes surrounding her life are described in explicitly erotic terminology:

[o]nly the River can get in and out, lying on her back on the floor of the valley like a woman besottedly in love, forever desiring the forest above her reflected in her eyes...The valley is a cauldron of steaming passions...(296).

Like the sea, the river as image of fluidity and flux is associated with the woman. The dialectic of desire in this image is also revealing. The river/woman is described as yearning for the lover above her, but this Other is reflected in her eyes and, thus, part of herself. Concurrently, she covets her own image in the Other's eyes. Not only does the narrator clearly define her sexuality through relationship with another, but the merging of ego boundaries in this verbal picture subverts the cultural myths of masculine penetration. In Ashton-Warner's metaphorical picture of sexual love, dissolving bodily boundaries create a simultaneously mutual and narcissistic possession.¹²⁵

Appropriate to such a reinterpretation of the narrator's sexual fear is an overreading of the recurrent metaphor of the 'crinoline'. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a stiff fabric, formerly used for skirts and bonnets',¹²⁶ the metaphor achieves a *double entendre* which is not overtly acknowledged in the autobiographical text. Ashton-Warner states that the moral and intellectual climate of New Zealand is not conducive to a woman's recognition in professional or artistic fields, referring repeatedly to this as 'the

¹²⁵ I am even tempted to compare this image to Cixous's version of bisexuality: 'that is, each one's location in self (*réparage en soi*) of the presence ... of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this "self-permission", multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body'. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 254.

¹²⁶ *OED* IV, 2nd ed, 25-6.

crinoline over the head of the country' (330 *et al*). But just as the metaphorical bonnet can be said to stifle female articulation and thought (the discourses of the head), the trope can with equal validity be read as the symbolic skirt which conceals and smothers female sexuality. An overt acceptance of the existence of the Unconscious and its integral force, sexuality, is considered subversive enough:

I was assembling quite a fair picture of how things were behind the eyes, which is known by most students today but to me, way back there in the stale air beneath the crinoline over the head of the country, the respectability, righteousness and morality, the revelations came as simply shocking (282).

The narrator evades a narrative connection between her acquired knowledge and her personal sexual life, this latter lying unspoken beyond the borders of the text. Even the act of childbirth is not mentioned, although I would suggest, in concurrence with Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, that this silence represents an attempt by the author to avoid limiting her narrative around stereotypically female catalysts.¹²⁷ That her role as mother is also vitally important to her, however, has already been discussed in her dream of the sea which threatens to swallow her son, the precariously perched Ashton.

In her forties, the 'do-or-die stretch of life' (360), the battle between artistry and traditional women's roles reaches its apotheosis:

that artist was no romantic wraith feeding on dreams any more; he was a monster from outer space inhabiting the mind, a ruthless invader, demanding, fierce, bumping around knocking things over, jealous of the school and not prepared to accommodate either the wife or the teacher ... Very seldom would Keith mention my work or praise me for it but I knew why and I'd learnt not to bring up the subject ... It was the woman whom Keith loved, the wife and mother under his feet at home with the homely apron on (361).

This is a classic Ashton-Warner metaphors of location. Sylvia as wife is represented in the physically subordinate position of 'under [Keith's] feet'. The image is accentuated by the apron as symbol of bondage, representing a concealment and constriction of the speaker's personal identity. This apron is thus a badge denoting ties to the 'home', or a synecdochical signifier of her socially defined and accepted role of housewife. Despite these connotations, however, the narrator explicitly depersonalises her dissatisfaction.

Brodzki and Schenck 53.

Characteristically, the threatening 'monster' of violence and disruption is externalised as an outer force.

In response to the narrator's attempts to disown this monster, I would define it as the incarnation of her inner space, the product of years of artistic suppression in the role of wife and teacher attached to the headmaster. Her artistry becomes a Frankenstein, a creation or alter ego over which she cannot always impose mastery. Suzanne Egar, in a discussion of *Spinster* recognises the interiority of the recurrent Ashton-Warner trope:

[t]hrough the use of inner debate Warner shows that the enemy is within the gates, at first dormant, but soon prowling, ready to pounce. The enemy is [the female protagonist] Vorontosov's own sexual, emotional and spiritual responsiveness.¹²⁸

In fulfilment of this theory, *I Passed this Way* describes the monster of her autobiography in terms of a fantasy of sexual possession:

[t]he monster was the other man in the home who I knew Keith resented ... In the interest of domestic harmony I'd keep the monster out of the home, lock him up in some Selah ... where I could go to him like a secret paramour and let him have his way with me, then return home again as a wife. Two distinct lives (361).

The narrator does not unreservedly desire the power to suppress the monster, as it symbolically embodies her artistic drive and her muse. It suggests, in fact, a solution to her earlier breakdown by focussing her frustration. In the purely sexual sphere, the monster serves as a usefully displaced infidelity to Keith, or a catch-all for any 'unruly' desires she has for Pan and possibly for her friend Opal. By the same token, as its symbolic purpose is to defuse or displace sexual desire, the motif indicates the powerful silencing placed upon women's sexual self-determination.

Yet the most fascinating aspect about the extract above is the portrayed relationship between creativity and *sexuality* in the woman artist. Not only does Ashton-Warner up-end the traditional employment of a female muse, but she removes such a literary cliché from its pedestal by endowing it with an aggressive and intrusive *body*. The incorporation of such a metaphor accentuates both the radical associations attached to a woman who dares to call herself artist, and the difficulties incurred by her in making such a gesture.

¹²⁸ Suzanne Egar, "Sylvia Ashton-Warner", *Quadrant* 26:5 (June 1982) 59.

It is proof of social influence, but also of Ashton-Warner's opposing desires, that the internal conflict between artist and woman remains subterranean:

neither stirred the real issue ... the other man in our marriage. That was a matter of living and of dying involving us both when I'd book my cabin on an overseas ship, of knives and blood to the death between the headmaster and the monster, which he knew all right and I knew but which remained unspoken till death did us part (362).

Within the primary text, the narrator eventually submits to the conventional choice of marriage, and the transgressive element is relegated to the symbolic subtext. The religious and social doctrine 'till death do us part' is constantly evoked as linguistic defence against her voicing of marital doubts. Thus, the violent and dramatic imagery of a fantasised showdown is sublimated before the letter of the law.

Even after Keith's death, Ashton-Warner continues to justify her choice of artistry *within* the restricting parameters of love and loyalty. The only suggestions we have of a retrospective possible resentment of her marriage are indirect and hastily suppressed. For instance, in recalling a conversation in which Keith says that 'he wished he'd freed me much earlier. Well at least he *said* that' (364), the narrative voice is ironic but avoids conclusive closure. Another example occurs when Sylvia visits India, to discover women who incarnate the vital, vocal bird which she once painted: '[a]fter my first half-century, "woman" was a word with new meaning. Handsome, vivacious, energetic, childless...' (393). The excerpt reveals a highly conscious re-reading of her gender signifier and, inherently, a liberation of her own experience as a woman. Nevertheless, her previous reading of the term 'woman' remains hidden, implied only by its difference from the adjectives listed.

I have illustrated that Ashton-Warner is privy to the fact that women have multi-dimensional lives due to their conflicting images of self and their social roles. As Estelle Jelinek proposes, women find it less practically viable to achieve the ordered single-mindedness of men.¹²⁹ Thus, Ashton-Warner shrewdly observes of her husband that '[h]is thought had the translucence of a young man undivided. His dreams were the same as his needs', and notes briefly that this difference between them is to always divide her from him (206). When she visually translates their psychologies on to paper, the difference of male and female mindscapes is reiterated:

¹²⁹ Jelinek 17.

the normality of Keith's, green growth above and the strata below ... my own a black cavern full of ravaging flames with no surface coverage at all ... Opal's a strange composition in turquoise greens and blues, a fluid compromise and with little relation to standard topography... (309).

As Keith's aims and desires are equivalent to those required of him by socialised gender roles, his psychology can be termed normal. Opal's mind, on the other hand, represents that which is outside of cultural prescription and defies comprehension. Rather than being a solid, measurable piece of earth, her psychology is illustrated and inscribed in synonymous terms of fluidity and mystery to those which draw the narrator to the sea. As I have suggested, Opal is not indicative merely of an alternative option to patriarchal representations of identity and relationship, but is the elusive (m)Other even to her female friend. Sylvia's own mindscape is particularised by its absence of surface cover, suggesting perhaps the ideal representation of a female self without the imposed veneer of social roles. If we follow this reading, the Dantesque image of inferno can be re-read as a positive celebration of passion. The symbol of the cave is also indisputably gynec, and thus merges in a symbolic pattern with images of water which intersect throughout the text as a substitute for man-made structures such as the road.

Characteristically of the women in this study, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's solution to the fragmented nature of her life and selves is art. As a child playing Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata', she senses precociously that there are ways in which to indirectly - thus safely - express internal sentiments: '[t]o sense an alternative to the already established was to break cover from conformity, to get out from under the crinoline...' (69). Writing, in particular, is a source of psychological catharsis, as it 'siphon[s] off the effervescence of dreaming' (346-7). In practical terms, also, the self-employment of writing potentially enables her to combine motherhood with a vocation:

[t]he only way I see of extricating myself from the bloody profesh at this late date is to change my occupation for another that pays sufficiently ... that leaves me at home to be a mother ... and gives me time to be an artist, and this spells writing. Not a marvellous writer, famous and all that, just a working writer, functional. In turn this requires ... deep and widespread study, a secluded place to work in and ... and the *time* (294).

We hear the recurrent call for a room of one's own which Virginia Woolf articulated for women writers contemplating the twentieth century. Throughout

her life, Sylvia is to return, as to a touchstone, to this dream of 'a room to myself in the city with just enough for one: a bed, table, stove, an easel and something to wash myself in...' (141).

The creative space eventually built by Ashton-Warner is not Utopian but pragmatic, and one which promotes conciliation with other aspects of her life. Unlike Janet Frame's metaphorical Mirror City, Ashton-Warner's place is a literal one, embodied in many rooms which she terms 'Selah' throughout her life. For both artists, a self-made structure permits a perpetuation of personal, artistic liberty *within* the reality of social roles and duties. Yet such a *locus* requires constant protection against the jealous demands of a male-dominated society. As Stead notes, Ashton-Warner's autobiographical and fictional narratives all focus on 'the freedom of the creative spirit, the making of a space, a privacy, in which it can live and breathe, *the guarding of that space against invasion*' (emphasis added).¹³⁰ Unlike Frame and Hyde, Sylvia has a husband to help build and stack wood for her studio. However, as I expressed in my analysis of the monster motif, the protection and comfort of a spouse often works at cross-purposes to the single-minded consciousness of the artist. Even Sylvia's plea to return from the domestic fold to teaching earns Keith's defensive disapproval. His traditionalist argument reflects the artificially padded cell erected by society for women when he says that 'I just can't bear to see my wife working. It's a reflection on me as a husband' (247). As we saw with reference to the commodifying influence of social machinery upon female sexuality, women are often soft-talked into submissive roles under the pretence of protection.

Ashton-Warner's repeated outspokenness in *I Passed this Way* corroborates the rebellious gesture of autobiographical witnessing, and the more subtle transgressions made on the level of narrative subtext. As a result, of all the writers in this study she has received the least amount of favourable or even adequate attention in any sphere of her literary (or educational) accomplishments. One reason for her invisibility is the critical tendency to write off her writing style on traditional misogynist grounds. Even in literary analytical material which ostensibly praises her work, a limited perspective is culturally embedded in the terminology used. Thus, in the first serious approach to her work, Dennis McEldowney subscribes to pejoratives which have historically been used to circumscribe women's writing as non-serious, thus ensuring the preservation of literary space as exclusively masculine. According to McEldowney, her 'discoveries have been made not

¹³⁰ Stead 58-9.

so much through intellectual contemplation as through intensity of feeling'.¹³¹ This opinion is echoed by Karl Stead when speaking of Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame and Ashton-Warner as 'representative' of New Zealand women writers. Upon an eclectic selection of writing, Stead imposes a theory of generalisation in which he finds 'the lack of any profoundly etched social identity, so that the raw, untrammelled, human personality and intelligence is overlaid with very little and breaks out easily into full abundant self-expression'.¹³²

The critical descriptions above are profoundly ambivalent, seemingly complimentary in that they praise an alternative form of emotive structure which is 'not hidebound by forms and decorums and literary convention'.¹³³ Nevertheless, the feminist critic, reading from an ancient perspective of defensiveness, cannot fail to hear echoes of derogation and dismissal. It is ironic that Stead criticises J. C. Reid's dismissal of 'women's writing' in general and Ashton-Warner's inscriptions in particular as 'hectic, neurotic, hysterical, pretentious, undisciplined', claiming that this outburst 'tells us more about traditional academic responses to literature than about Sylvia Ashton-Warner'.¹³⁴ Yet, in the same breath, Stead notes that 'Mansfield and Ashton-Warner have a histrionic quality which the more retiring Frame lacks'.¹³⁵ In the context of this study, the critic's remarks appear naïve. It is more relevant to say of each autobiographer examined that their exceptional character, aided by the cathartic discovery of writing, enables personal growth *despite* the often uncomfortable social personae thrust upon them. The achievement of artistic expression is not reached 'easily' but as a necessary prerequisite to psychic health, in many cases being the only outlet for a repressed sense of self.

Yet a correlative problem for women writers is in the reception of atypically emotive literary output, which reinforces the original female sin of speaking aloud. McEldowney unconsciously implicates himself in the one-eyed discourse of the patriarchy:

[t]he central problem for them all ... [is e]mbodying emotion in an acceptable form ... If one may judge from statistics of

¹³¹ Dennis McEldowney, "Sylvia Ashton-Warner: A Problem of Grounding", *Landfall* 23 (Sept. 1969) 142.

¹³² Stead 52.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid 59.

¹³⁵ Ibid 52.

mental illness ... the volcano of the affective life rumbles most ominously in the female (emphasis added).¹³⁶

What commences in McEldowney's article as an acknowledgment of women's contribution to art results in an essentialist interpretation of both genders and their writing styles. By using artistic mediums to overcome social pressures, these women find themselves judged personally by their literary form and style. As McEldowney states, women's emotions and their inscription are considered somehow unruly or threatening to a canonical delineation of circumspect and 'acceptable form'. The comment is haunted by echoes of the Victorian witchhunt, where hysteria was used as a catch-all phrase for rebellious female behaviour such as sexual or emotional dissatisfaction.¹³⁷ Jane Ussher extrapolates:

wherever we turn women are controlled very effectively, so that they never gain the status of being the One. And madness, as a description of our fears, a category for our pain, or label for our anger, both marks us as the Other, and prevents us from challenging the One.¹³⁸

It is possible to apply these critical *faux pas* to a useful interpretation of the text at hand. The deemed hysterical tone of *I Passed This Way* as re-read within a feminist hermeneutics is the result of a repressed sexuality exploding through the fissures of language. In this manner, the narrator's metaphor of the mindscape is equivalent to the autobiographical subtext, a boiling and fertile cauldron which permanently threatens to escape the confines of its orderly surface. As Suzanne Egar comments, Ashton-Warner's prose style is 'often almost volcanic'. And, in Egar's article, an unspecified critic is cited as remarking naively upon the author's 'explosive passion, an eruption of innocent sensuality which is quite remarkable'.¹³⁹ I reiterate my earlier suggestion, that Ashton-Warner's sexual passion is far from being unaware of itself. Rather, it is suppressed throughout her life, and projected through her autobiographical subtext. The cultural indoctrination of female sexual guilt is both represented, and rebelled against, in such a strategic gesture.

¹³⁶ McEldowney 234-5.

¹³⁷ This point, which is so integral to the historical and contemporary reception of women's texts, will be expanded on in Chapter Four.

¹³⁸ Jane Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1992) 14.

¹³⁹ Egar 59. The critic unfortunately does not explore this loaded metaphor in terms of feminist implications.

Cultural conditioning is also patent in the vocabulary used by female critics in their approaches to Ashton-Warner's autobiographical testimony. Suzanne Egar, for example, blames what she sees as self-indulgent, trivial or tedious in the text on the advanced age of the writer. Although she sees the autobiography as 'a remarkably *understated* depiction of the same woman's escape from the taboos and expectations that bedevilled married women in the 1950s',¹⁴⁰ she fails to elucidate the socially conditioned and *strategic* dynamics behind such subtlety. Fleur Adcock has also criticised the sentimentality and melodrama which 'mar' Ashton-Warner's novel *Spinster*.¹⁴¹ And I cite Carole Durix:

[t]he book is not a controlled artifact, not a wise, considered or guarded summing up of life. It is much more an intense reliving, seemingly spoken aloud rather than written, with all the messiness and contradictoriness that implies.¹⁴²

As I suggested in Chapter One, the spectrum of women's writing appears to promote a more personal style, loosely structured around emotional catalysts. Yet this generalisation predicates a critical double-bind. Despite the critically dated approach of the above writers, strategies of fragmentation and excess are generally interpreted as a political choice of non-conformism to rigid structural norms. Writers such as Hélène Cixous aim to embody this theory in an alternative women's literature, a prime example of which is Cixous's autobiographically-styled novel *Le Livre de Promethea*. In this text, linear order and rational continuity of meaning are replaced by a fluid lyricism structured around a system of repetitive yet ambiguous key metaphors. Both Ashton-Warner's autobiography and Cixous's text are organised by the pattern and rhythm of emotional experience, and by the metaphorical parallel of the sea. Reaping the advantages of a recently established feminist theory, however, Cixous is in a more liberated position to expressly delineate such a structure as grounded in the ebb and flow of female sexuality.

It remains crucial, nevertheless, to question binary and essentialist oppositions which would have women's writing confined to a desirable style or organisational structure of language. *I Passed This Way* displays, in fact, both conventional and experimental structuring mechanisms. The need for a more traditional ordering principle persists in the metaphor of the journey, often

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 61.

¹⁴¹ Cited in Egar 60.

¹⁴² Carole Durix, "Literary Autobiography or Autobiographical Literature?: The Work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner", *Ariel* 18:2 (April 1987) 10.

indicated through the trope of the road which was so instructive to her adolescence. As Carole Durix observes, her text consciously moves towards the *coordination* of disparate desires, and a 'somewhat reconciled, structured self, which has its place in society'.¹⁴³ Durix's argument is that such a sense of closure may be achieved through the superimposition of the rationalising present perspective of the writer upon the complexities of the past. Both the title and the omnipresent nature of the road as metaphor and psychic guideline support a reading that the narrator is in fact re-tracing her rite of passage toward some form of integrated self, both internally and within her society.

Yet I maintain that Ashton-Warner's text always has a reserve of structuring images which are more applicable to an alternative women's discourse. The following passage indicates such an image, and summarises the subtext which I have been discussing throughout this chapter:

[y]ou need to be certain of your direction, which route to choose at the complex intersections and detours, then channel everything into the one stream to become a current with force. If only I ... if only there were not all this music in my head, if only I didn't love so much. I could have been a very fine spinster ... had it not been for the beat, beat, beat of the tom-tom. Juices flowed like sap in the spring, and the spring pushed on and on ... You forded frequent floods of passion or they'd swallow you and sweep you away (*Passed*, 324).

Within this paradigm, life's course, artistic drive and implicit sexual passion are imaged in liquid terms. That all three are described in terms of the river suggests that for the woman writer, the forward progression of the life and its obstacles are synonymous. Offsetting the model of the linear progress of the self towards a specific goal, therefore, is revealed a dynamic of constant flux, mediated by conflicting influences. The total visual model is representative of the complex nature of the female self and her desires.

I have discussed how for the narrator of *I Passed This Way*, the sea represents the Other of the Unconscious, or the terrifying power of the sexual/artistic drives which threaten to shatter the circumspect shell of wife and mother. The narrative complexity *vis à vis* the tropes of nature and culture emanates from the difficult negotiations of self experienced by Ashton-Warner. The natural landscape is a contradictory signifier, exclusive of Sylvia's romantic dreams of a solo life in an artist's studio, yet conducive to marriage with a man she loves and to the foundation of artistic imagery.

¹⁴³ Ibid 8.

Contemporaneously, the rude blotting out of the author's signature by a social environment which cannot accept her so-called contradictory roles becomes a driving force behind her independence:

[i]solation is the best condition for procreation, as lovers will agree, ostracism the best sperm for conception, silence the best womb for the idea-fetus, persecution the best of incubators, and austerity the best education; all of which the White Cloud supplied with profligacy...(*Passed*, ix).

It is a testimony to the energy and determination of the author's character, however, that such diverse adversity is turned to advantage and some degree of internal reconciliation. As she asserts, 'I tried to be everything: a good wife, mother and teacher as well, trying to salvage my life simultaneously, and I must say I knew great joy and a lot of it too...' (288). What remains to be answered outside of the parameters of this thesis is *why* such elements of her identity should ever have been mutually exclusive, and why she should ever have needed to resort to narrative subterfuge in order to encounter the full spectrum of her female reality.

Must the Room Of Her Own be The Attic? Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World*

*'The prestige of patriarchy is revived around madness ...
the madman remains a minor and for a long time
reason will retain for him the aspect of the Father'*

Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation:
A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*

*'She was one of those deviations
by which man thinks to reconstruct himself'*

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

The pejorative critical responses to Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way* raise the fundamental issue of women's historical association with hysteria, emotional excess and general discursive abnormality. I suggested in the introductory chapter that in daring to shatter the cultural mirrors conscribing women, female narratives have been declared undesirable and unruly. If masculine power structures are to remain intact, women must be silenced and rendered invisible beneath their patriarchal masks. In the twentieth century, an increasing infiltration of women's voices into the traditionally masculine literary and public spheres necessitates an exponential defensive backlash. A favourite means of instigating re-repression is by recourse to archetypal myths, created to remove the original threat which is the difference of woman. Thus, women are regrounded in their bodies, their sexualities are channelled into the function of reproduction, and any attempt to voice intellectual or bodily dis-ease is disregarded. If women will not stay silent, social and literary institutions seem to say, then we will define their speech as mad - and banish them irrevocably.

In the Victorian age, hysteria (derived from the Greek word for uterus)¹⁴⁴ was conceived as an exclusively female complaint, as the lot and prerogative of women.¹⁴⁵ All of the autobiographers discussed in this thesis emphasise their experiences of institutional madness and nervous breakdown. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, as I have shown, achieves some positive

¹⁴⁴ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Allen Lane, 1974) 57.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

transformation of psychosomatic distress through a subtextual analysis of her body's discourse. In this chapter, I will focus on the central theme of madness in Robin Hyde's *A Home in this World*, which is grounded in an attempt to assert the voice of the non-conformist. Hyde's persona pre-empts her own inevitable description as insane and disorderly, and gains a limited advantage over those who would thus name her. In addition, she converts expulsion to the social fringe of the psychiatric asylum into an opportunity for respite from a hostile society. Once again, Hyde's text provides evidence of a culturally indoctrinated masculine fear of women's sexuality, and the ensuing drive to silence women. Out of the pressing need to break a latent matrilineal continuity comes a resurgence of feminine stereotypes, and a renewed need for the madwoman's attic.

In a perfect example of *voler*,¹⁴⁶ feminist critics and theorists have appropriated the diagnosis of women's madness and translated it according to their own agenda. Crucial influences upon such a repossession have been Gilbert and Gubar's signature text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and French feminist psychoanalytic theory. Once it is re-read as a tool of transgression, 'mad' language can be used as a lever against canonical assumptions which typically ignore women's experience. And if it is used effectively, the promotion of fragmented, non-linear plots and emotionally excessive language necessitates a reassessment of conventional, rational narrative styles and structures. Yet in Robin Hyde's case, despite the favourable reception of her fictional work, her autobiography has been critically avoided. It seems inevitable that either censorship or blindness step in where women's literature slips between the gaps of what has been defined as proper to woman. As Shoshana Felman encapsulates:

[m]adness and women ... turn out to be the two outcasts of the establishment of readability. An ideological conditioning of literary and critical discourse, a political orientation of reading thus affirms itself, not so much through the negative treatment of women as through their total neglect, their pure and simple *omission*. This critical oversight, which appears as a *systematic* blindness to significant facts, functions as a censorship mechanism, as a symbol eradication of women from the world of literature.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ I refer to Cixous's famous neologism on the pilfering of the patriarchal tools of oppression in order to turn them to women's advantage, or the 'steal-and-fly' approach. See Cixous, "Laugh" 258.

¹⁴⁷ Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy", *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991) 11.

I suggested in Chapter Two that women search for an elusive consistent matrilineal narrative thread to follow in terms of expressing their personal reading of reality. As a precedent to autobiographical writing, therefore, women face 'the whole problem of what to do with this unlabelled, disallowed, disavowed, not-even-consciously perceived experience, experience which cannot be spoken about because it has no embodiment in existing art'.¹⁴⁸

This corroborates Sandra Gilbert's notion that for women the mere decision to write is stained by an inherent 'anxiety of authorship'.¹⁴⁹ Unease stems from any negotiation of the historically illicit practice of writing, and is constantly compounded by alienating, male-inscribed literary stereotypes of femaleness. The paradigmatic assumption for Gilbert and Gubar is that repudiation of such structures and constructions in nineteenth century texts occurs on a subconscious level. This results in a personal and linguistic split, between the woman as muted mirror of society and a chafing female desire displaced into imagery, symbol and narrative contradiction.¹⁵⁰ In an extension of this theory to more recent writing, 'madness' has achieved revalidated currency as a *deliberate* promotion of that which falls outside of the socially acceptable limits of women's behaviour and articulation. Both Hyde and Ashton-Warner may be located on the continuum of such a movement towards *strategic use*. Whereas Ashton-Warner's emotional and sexual overspill is resolved through implicit techniques, Robin Hyde more actively claims a place with the mad in an overt defence of heterogeneous voices, and through re/location in an alternative communal identity.

Hyde's thematic content reveals reservations, however, about a total affiliation to the anti-structure of madness. Her narrative bears witness to the fears of feminist critics who, at loggerheads with those who romanticise madness, wish to defuse that which they perceive to be a dangerous myth. The theory that madness is a 'subjective aberration which may be overcome when [the individual or] society ceases to regard certain types of behavior as monstrous or crazy'¹⁵¹ certainly has purchase with regards to *A Home in this World*. However, we must question whether an indiscriminate application of such a paradigm to women's texts has more pyrrhic than pragmatic value.

¹⁴⁸ Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write", *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1972) 9.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship", Warhol and Herndl 293.

See Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* esp. chapter one.

Karen Stein, "Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic", *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983) 123.

Theorists such as Nina Baym, Phyllis Chesler and Shoshana Felman read the cries of hysterics, schizophrenics, anorexics, agoraphobics *et al* as a plea for help which is itself socialised into the female psyche. To paraphrase Chesler, dependency and the status of victim are ideologically inherent in the peripheral role assigned to women.¹⁵² Acting as a centrifugal counterpoint to this position of disadvantage is the authoritative figure of masculine 'help'; legal and medical institutions, scientific reason and their witnesses, acceptable language and literature. In other words, to promote madness as linguistic practice is to incarcerate women more fully as victims dependent on the master(ing) discourses of the father-figure. As Felman elaborates:

[w]ith respect to women's madness, man's reason reacts by trying to *appropriate* it: in the first place, by claiming to 'understand' it, but with an external understanding which reduces the madwoman to a spectacle, to an *object* which can be *known* and *possessed* ... such are the methods used by masculine reason so as to *objectify* feminine madness, thereby mastering it.¹⁵³

In this manner, Freud ostensibly attempted to liberate, but actually to *recreate*, Dora in his most classic case (of failure). As such, he set himself up as the possessor and dispenser of reason against Dora's feminine disorder. Dora's irrationality was deemed redeemable only through an interpretation and overwriting by Freud's rational signature.

As a precaution, Freud underwrote the Dora experiment with a myth of essential femininity which precluded her attempt to defy him. One of her options was to reject his law, and to be cast out of the realm of social normality and acceptability, in other words *to refuse to be cured*. Another was to impress Freud by her subversive thinking, a technique employed by Anaïs Nin in her intellectual and romantic encounters with psychoanalysis. Nin's diary constitutes an island or alternative world, 'a traffic island from which [she] will survey the analysis, keep control of it ... analyze the analysis'.¹⁵⁴ Both Dora and Nin achieved a circuitous victory and a reversal of power positions over their analysts, Dora through her abdication, and Nin by a withholding of information and through sexual betrayal.¹⁵⁵ As such, they

¹⁵² Chesler 38.

¹⁵³ Felman 14.

¹⁵⁴ Anaïs Nin, *Incest: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1993) 294.

¹⁵⁵ See Anaïs Nin, *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin* (London: Penguin, 1986) 252. Of her deteriorating relations with Dr. René Allendy, she writes: '[a]s I fight off analysis, I betray exactly what he suspects ... that I want his love as a trophy, not for his very own self'.

constituted a threat to the accepted, masculine rationale, and were decried by lovers and analysts alike. But, as Irigaray has pointed out, the arrogance of phallocentrism then takes the credit for female rebellion: 'the only redemption of her value as a girl [is] to seduce the [psychoanalytic] father, to draw from him the mark if not the admission of some interest'.¹⁵⁶

Thus, for Dora or Nin to positively use their own discourse (or silence) was to classically fulfil Freud's theoretical scenario of father-seduction.¹⁵⁷ This thesis is permeated by the notion that patriarchy has set itself up as an absolute referent against which any divergence is measured. Both Dora and Nin can be read as case studies for the predicament of all writers and readers of women's texts. Hyde, like Ashton-Warner, wavers between explicit confrontation of and submission to conventional literary and social dictates. And for contemporary critics, the available hermeneutics are still limited to silence, capitulation to or rejection by the discourses of the masters. Should women adopt the masochistic position and be seduced by patriarchal definitions of rationality and normality, even to the point of elevating Freud or his disciple Lacan as our critical fathers?¹⁵⁸ Or is it preferable to *promote* our difference by adopting linguistic strategies that are stereotyped as female, to defer to essentialism and to use the feared 'feminine' position of seduction in order to win over the masters?¹⁵⁹

It is less of a compromise option than a refusal to be pinned down that leads me to suggest a pluralist approach. As I stated in Chapter One, the agendas of feminist and deconstructive schools of thought intersect in their desire to collapse the unified structures of master and subordinate discourses. Within a feminist anti-structure, a theory of multiple readings must be promoted as opposed to one which is unitary and rigid. Annette Kolodny sets forth the most cogent case for the redundancy of systematic coherence amongst feminist scholars, and summarises by asserting that 'the fact of our diversity would finally place us securely where, all along, we should have

¹⁵⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum* 106.

¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Freud states that the obstacle to closure on the case was Dora's transference of desire from her father to himself: '...she took her revenge on me as she wanted to take her revenge on him, and deserted me as she believed herself to have been deceived by him'. Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of A Case of Hysteria* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 141.

Pertinently, Nina Baym asserts that 'this attachment to Freud (and Lacan, his up-to-date surrogate) manifests precisely that masochism that Freud and his followers identified with the female ... our attempt to seduce him, or our compliance with his attempt to seduce us, guarantees his authority'. See in "Madwoman" 52.

Jane Gallop manipulates this idea in *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 65. See esp. her chapter on Irigaray's theoretical rape of the Freudian father, Gallop's speculations on the father's *complicity*, or desire to be seduced by the Other's discourse.

been: camped out, on the far side of the minefield, with the other pluralists and pluralisms'.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, madness as discursive resolution to the crises of female identity and subjectivity will be positively yet cautiously assessed.

Hyde's *A Home In This World* provides a paradigm for ways in which women's use of language, in particular the dialect(ic) of madness, can snare as well as liberate.¹⁶¹ Hyde proffers a poetics of 'home' that locates itself on the margins, yet fears its own ec-centricity. Correspondingly, her narrative suggests thematic and structural alternatives to conventional autobiographical constructions of identity, yet closes upon an implied disintegration of self. She may, to use the phraseology of Jane Marcus, re/sign her name in the private sphere of autobiography. Alternatively, however, this autobiography may constitute a philosophical resignation from herself.

As an unmarried mother and a self-professed neurotic, the narrator of *A Home in this World* embodies the abject and the marginal. By defining herself as such, however, she embarks upon an optimistic re-centring of such figures:

[w]e're at a period of readjustment. The little voices piping up in the wilderness, the Singing Mice and the neurotics...are at present either quaint or unimportant. But one day they will sufficiently conquer their irascibility or plaintiveness to sound not such fools. They will perhaps learn to teach tired people that they are tired, fed-up people why they are fed-up. If they have a vision of beauty, let them persist: let their retreat be only a strategic one.¹⁶²

Her derision of the medical establishment's method of 'assault by sound' (7) is an extrapolation of the 'loudspeaker' voice which 'keeps on talking and talking to his wife in a parade-ground voice' (5). Both represent the patriarchal discourse in its aim to define and silence women. Pertinently, the metaphorical wife of the loudspeaker 'never says anything back' (5). When she has, it has frequently been through either an exploitation of psychological illness or in the private realm of *belles lettres*.¹⁶³ This genre¹⁶⁴ has traditionally

¹⁶⁰ Kolodny 158.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Robin Hyde, *A Home In This World*, Intod. Derek Challis (Auckland: Longman Paul Ltd, 1984) 7. Subsequent references will be parenthetically included in the body of the text.

There appears to be a particular trend of autobiographies written by the female partners/associates prolific male authors, Anaïs Nin being a prime example, and an equal proliferation of clinically turbed female counterparts such as Zelda Fitzgerald.

In her introduction to *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: rtheastern UP, 1989) vii, Elizabeth Goldsmith defines the belletristic mode as one of private correspondence, with another or the self. I explain my minor distinction between autobiography and *les lettres* in 2n. On Hyde's intention to publish, I cite Derek Challis: '[w]hether [*Home*] was

represented a strategic retreat from, and undermining of, the predominance of male writing and female stereotypes in literature. The *Oxford English Dictionary* sets a precedent for the reception of such testimonies when it defines '*belles lettres*' as a term 'now generally applied ... to the lighter branches of literature'.¹⁶⁵ Hyde joins the feminist agenda, therefore, in her repudiation of such a pejorative definition. By writing an autobiography of the disenfranchised, her fundamental aim is to promote the 'little' and 'neurotic' voices of those who are not the socially or canonically privileged.

The motivations behind the culturally-embedded exclusion of these (read female and/or mad) voices are elaborate and somewhat sinister. Texts such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* reflect a patriarchal need to simplify woman into the dichotomous symbols of angel or whore/monster created by a traditional male fear of female sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir claims that '[i]t is the horror of his own carnal contingency which [man] projects upon [woman]'.¹⁶⁶ Gilbert and Gubar also emphasise a double bind which is the simultaneous cultural repression and fetishisation of woman's 'dreadful and bloody link to nature'.¹⁶⁷ Although driven by fear, the banishment of women to their bodies endows a phallocentric discourse with exclusive rights to speech and legislation. As Jane Gallop summarises:

[b]y giving up their bodies, men gain power - the power to theorize, to represent themselves, to exchange women, to reproduce themselves and mark their offspring with their name.¹⁶⁸

Thus, it is not that which women lack which drives their historical exclusion from penmanship. Rather, the containment of procreative potential renders woman threateningly powerful. By removing her pen and writing *about* her, the patriarchy can define woman. In a parallel dynamic, by denoting woman as sexualised and domestic *object*, man can control that which he fears. The binary implications of 'worship or fear, love or loathing' which Gilbert and Gubar recognise in woman's embodiment¹⁶⁹ can be reconciled as long as man continues to hold the pen.

intended for eventual publication is unknown, although several carefully typed drafts exist. It is probable that it was prepared as a detailed record of her life in this period so that it might, at some later date, be included in an autobiography'. Intro. to Hyde, *Home* ix-x.

OED II, 2nd ed 91.

Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984)

Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 15.

Gallop 67.

Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 19.

The tropes 'woman' and 'madness' have not only become inextricably linked, but causally related. This is a reflection of the fear underlying patriarchy's relation to women, which is multiplied if the symbol of corporeality begins to speak. If a woman manages to speak with her frightening body, this speech can only be suffocated under a universalising justification of irrationality. Yet the patriarchy is itself paradoxically caught, as it has created this discourse. Even Freud recognised female hysteria as a result of sexual *repression*,¹⁷⁰ although he failed to acknowledge that the responsibility lay with social conditioning. Catherine Clément, in comparison, views the cultural category of hysteria as:

the only form of contestation possible in certain types of social organisation ... This language not yet at the point of verbal expression, restrained within the bond of the body ... remains convulsive. Men look but they do not hear.¹⁷¹

As I have elaborated, repressed female sexuality often finds an outlet either in psychosomatic symptoms (displacement), or in a conscious exploitation of madness which is an overt act of rebellion against the centralised discourse. Whether contrived or unconscious, such transgression must be immediately and effectively repressed in order to maintain the smooth surface of the body politic.

Robin Hyde perceives the underlying insecurity which motivates patriarchal oppression when she states ironically that '[m]an cannot be so great, since I by whiles confine him in my womb...' (38). As De Beauvoir indicates, the fear of death as represented by bodily contingency is reflected in the acknowledgment of mortal origins. Women's embodiment is irrevocably sealed as she is the bearer of life, and by association, death. Paradoxically, whilst the occupational role of maternity is a convenient way in which to remove women from public discourse, motherhood itself is the greatest threat to the patriarchal teleology of man as omnipotent Creator and representative artistic creator. In a scene with her ex-lover, Hyde's narrator ironically portrays the foreign stigma attached to women's experience, emphasising the masculine fear of procreativity:

[a]s we stood, we heard a long cry, shuddering off in the wind, too ghostly to be pleasant. There was a maternity

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Freud's *Dora* 22: '...hysterical symptoms are the expression of their most secret d repressed wishes'.

¹⁷¹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: innesota UP, 1986) 39.

hospital quite near my lodgings, but this was the first time I had ever heard a woman crying there in pain. Lonnie shivered ... 'My,' he said, 'that's a weird sound' (35).

Whereas for the narrator the sound incarnates the trials of her real experience, to Lonnie it is the sign of the unknown and the grotesque.¹⁷² In a feminist extrapolation of Mikhail Bakhtin's fascinating work on the grotesque, Mary Russo pinpoints the taboos surrounding 'the pregnant body, the ageing body, the irregular body', and the fear inculcated when such unruly bodies are set loose in the public sphere.¹⁷³ Hyde emphasises her point by juxtaposing the scene with that of virginal girls at a dance with their 'young slender waists and uprising breasts' (35). The untouched-hence-unspoiled female body remains the emblem of male desire so long as that desire is not satiated, and the burden of masculine guilt not transferred visibly to the female.

Promotion of the culturally grotesque body and its articulation has been the crucial conceptual focus of French feminists such as Cixous. As Russo summarises, '[f]emale sexuality and especially the mother's body, as it figures simultaneously demarcation and dissolution of identity, serve this cultural project of disrupting the political economy of the sign as it is produced in dominant discourse' (7). Within the framework which I set up in Chapter Two, the power of disturbance contained by the concept of maternity, and the need to repress any articulation of this disruption, suggest motherhood rather than the Lacanian phallus as the *silenced* or *invisible* signifier which designates all signification.

When nonconforming bodies are displayed, therefore, the patriarchal backlash illustrates a dynamic of double repression. As Russo encapsulates, 'women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive - dangerous, and in danger.'¹⁷⁴ As I examined with regards to Sylvia Ashton Warner, the linked desire for and fear of women's bodies is translated into a silencing of women's sexuality through its appropriation by social dictates about chastity and fidelity. On this point, Robin Hyde remarks scathingly:

¹⁷² Mary Russo summarises Bakhtin's definition of the 'grotesque body' as 'the body of becoming, cess, and change ... the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world', as opposed to the classical body which is 'monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism'. Although Bakhtin's is a Marxist reading, such a dialectic corresponds with claims made throughout this thesis about the nature of female identity, subjectivity, and relationship. Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory", *Twentieth Century Studies* (Fall 1985) 4.

Ibid 2.

Ibid 4.

[b]ecause one man had been somewhat unfair to me, almost in my childhood (and in order to be fair to his own physical demands of the moment), I had, in honour, to hang out a sort of notice: 'Not a Virgin. Unfairness Invited, Apply Within' ... The honour system ('You must always *tell* him if you're going to marry him') held us as securely as the old crude Scarlet Letter (29).

The dialectic functioning here is commensurate with that in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In each text, the woman has no identity except in the symbolic letter,¹⁷⁵ the sign of the *impropre*,¹⁷⁶ which is culturally read as loss of virginity. It is not the act of sex by an individual man which is condemned by the larger social body of patriarchy, *but the evidence of this act upon the body of the woman*. The woman's proper identity is reinscribed by her sexual state, whether in marriage or sin. As Hyde ironically remarks, 'I couldn't say "I'm Iris", because I am Miss Somebody' (10).

Yet patriarchal ownership is not the only relevant issue. The masculine name is implicated in the stigma of impropriety because the narrator's child is not authorised by the social contract of marriage. Thus, the narrator becomes simultaneously the *silenced* sign of masculine possession, and the *visible* proof of woman's lawlessness. She is labelled 'a wicked woman' by other women (51) out of a fear that they will repeat her destiny, and a smugness born of being on the right side of the patriarchal law. Indeed, so permeating is the power of cultural indoctrination that Hyde's baby's illegitimacy is 'something unspeakable' even to herself (54). As such, it creates an intraversable boundary between the narrator and strangers at the bach where she is staying despite their lack of knowledge of her affairs (54). We may also extrapolate that the 'unspeakable' nature of the illegitimacy stems from the denial of the father's participation and therefore the withholding of his legalising name. She and her child become, in other words, the guilty mark of masculine transgression which cannot be seen or spoken about. And in a final *coup de grâce*, Hyde is not only banished from the realm of manners and morality, but her status is justification for men to reinscribe their crime upon her. She is mired, therefore, in the reserve which patriarchy creates in its own morality, in the institutional gap which allows lawlessness to occur and to recur.

¹⁷⁵ Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 84.

¹⁷⁶ Russo 5. Part of the implication of this '*impropre*' is that the mark of sexual consummation represents a breakdown between individual boundaries, or the body's 'transgression of its own limits'. The maintenance of a unified, Classical self with impermeable bodily boundaries is influential on traditional autobiographical constructions of the self, as I explained in Chapter One.

Ellen Moers contends that women's socialised concern with physical appearance prompts them to give visual form to their self-denigration.¹⁷⁷ Thus, obesity, bulimia and anorexia have been read as the modern equivalents of psychosomatic illnesses such as hysteria, and parallel the embroidered scarlet letter in their subtle turning of the victimised woman against herself. As we shall see in Frame's *An Autobiography*, often the only means of defence against alienating social expectations is to render oneself invisible, or outside of the sexual economy. However, as Gilbert and Gubar express, such projection of a socialised self-image may in fact contain elements of social parody. Thus, 'such afflictions as anorexia and agoraphobia simply carry patriarchal definitions of "femininity" to absurd extremes'.¹⁷⁸ In Hyde's case, both rebellion and an indoctrinated lack of self-worth are implicit in the demonstration of her lack of physical pride after the birth of her son:

I didn't look like an ideal, a rather sad nymph from the
woodlands carrying a child conceived by sunshine and rain;
I looked like an overweight, coarsened parody of what
[Gwen] used to know ... (69).

Both Hyde's breakdowns and the disregard of her exterior can be read as signs of protest against that which society demands from her as a woman. Concurrently, however, they are a sign of conditioned guilt, a way of re/signing herself to the margins of human interrelationships. *A Home in this World* demonstrates the double dynamic informing the female autobiographical act. As I explained in Chapter One, it is characteristic of female autobiographers to speak about alienating stereotypes of woman, but to avoid rejecting such images out of hand due to their 'culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization'.¹⁷⁹

Because Hyde's baby is *not* ephemerally conceived, but is the proof of male guilt, her silhouette is not one approved by the images of women set up in literature. Her reality is a parody of the mythical, virginal woman approved by male writers, as opposed to the embodied woman who is the symbol of his fear. Hyde's attempt to textually represent herself as altogether bodiless is a defensive strategy. As the narrator remarks, to fulfil *any* existing literary stereotype of women is to be eternally silenced like the great heroines is Durbeyfield and Madame Bovary:

¹⁷⁷Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 90-1.
¹⁷⁸Gilbert and Gubar "Infection" 297.
¹⁷⁹ibid 294.

[i]n films and in novels, the mothers of illegitimate children invariably died ... I remained inconveniently half-alive, with insurance policies of several hundred pounds, suicide-proof. *It wasn't natural* (100, emphasis added).

Literature, as an encoding of social values, has historically authorised female images in which real women do not recognise the characteristics, or even the existence, of their own lives. Robin Hyde thus displays a pragmatic awareness of the dangers haunting a mythologisation of life into literature. The drive behind her writing is less to be admitted to the canonical realm of masculine privilege than to deconstruct the effects which a literary heritage has had upon the self-definition of living women. Of her autobiographical testimony to female experience, she states:

[t]o minimise my own agony would be to slander and make a joke of thousands upon thousands of women and girls who have shut themselves up in iron cages, thrown themselves into rivers (or into the arms of complete bounders, who have felt justified in dropping them hard 'when the dance was done') (29).

As an alternative solution to literature as transcendental signifier, however, Hyde's autobiographical text tends toward a romanticisation of madness. Whilst emphasising that her stay at the asylum was voluntary, the narrator adds that '[s]till, twice I've been within paper-thinness of that very thing - becoming what is called a certified lunatic, a term which has always seemed to me picturesque as well as quaint' (60). As Ashton-Warner aligned psychological *angst* with a frustrated excess of creativity, Hyde associates madness and eccentricity with the artistic impulse. Her response to the term 'asylum' is ambiguous yet portentous. Outwardly she retains a rebellious bravado, indicting the Lodge as 'a madhouse' in order to decode the euphemistic, institutional terminology: "[a]n asylum's a place where people come when they have nowhere else to go" (14). Yet in a more serious mood, she admits that 'I was lonely because I was an alien ... In France they call an asylum "maison d'aliénés" (45). The implication is that for Hyde madness provides an alternative community as a reasonable recourse against permanent and universal displacement, as society contains a reserve of peripheral places for those who do not fill prescribed role stereotypes.

Hyde often returns to the paradoxical nature of madness as solution to social discomfort and dislocation. She states that at the asylum 'I had been so happy, so unreasonably dream-happy, after years when the veriest sap of

a psychologist could tell you that it would be impossible for a woman ever to be happy again' (18). Because she is a voluntary patient,¹⁸⁰ the institution represents a space in which she can evade the stereotypical roles of wife and mother assigned to women, and concentrate on her writing. Her attic, therefore, is an approximation of Virginia Woolf's 'room'. Simultaneously, however, the Lodge represents a form of entrapment:

so I went, and didn't look back at the attic windows, though there, unless they burn the place down or blow it up, a face will dwell for ever, my own face looking out. Unless, strangely and unexpectedly, I should find any freedom (19).

Her naming of the Lodge as 'the house of Dis' (15) marks it as an ec-centric zone, a driftnet of the dislocated, the disempowered and the dysfunctional. Although a substitutive *locus* to mainstream society, entry into the asylum infers a negative choice if not an obligation. And once the badge of madness is worn publicly and internalised, it is difficult to remove. Thus, the narrator is haunted by the possibility of genuine madness, or feels 'sane but scared of insanity' (16). As I shall discuss in the following chapter, Frame is pursued constantly by a commensurate spectre of real schizophrenia. In both cases, this fear is encouraged by the authority underwriting institutional diagnosis, and results in paranoid or internalised behaviour. As Hyde recalls:

I was afraid when my mind started making idiotic funny sentences which ran into each one another, which slipped round and round, tired of holding up one another's tails. I was very much afraid, and thought, So steady on. I took a medicinal tablet ... Wept bitterly ... (23).

Underlying this indoctrination by medical opinion, however, is an even more intensely pervading fear. The narrator of *A Home in this World* suspects that insanity, whether real or appropriated, is the only viable solution to one's dual (and doubly marginal) identity as woman and artist. Thus, the face at the attic window symbolises the repressed interior self, and the psychiatric institution the only place where it can be revealed. The elusive 'freedom' to which the narrator alludes will not be attained by escaping the Lodge, as it represents a philosophical, creative and physical state which mainstream society will not allow. Full social emancipation is the necessary condition for the narrator to be able to cast off the possibility of reclusivity which the Lodge presents. In other words, Hyde's experience of insanity as a trap exists in

¹ This assertion supported by Derek Challis's Introduction to *A Home In This World* xiv.

relative counterpoint to its rendering by social realities as an obligatory refuge. Thus, her narrator suggests that 'perhaps I came to this asylum of yours not because I was mad, but because I needed madness to survive - which is not an impossible state of affairs' (94).

However, as I expressed in the analysis of *I Passed this Way*, some sort of catharsis is encouraged by the natural environment. *A Home in this World* is another example of the projection of bodily experience on to symbolic natural tropes. In Hyde's text, however, instances of this dialectic are not only related to sexual desire but to a celebration of maternity. Thus, the narrator experiences an intense empathy with the natural world during her pregnancy:

I went slowly and heavily, and so did the leaves, which in their ripeness fell to earth, and pressed there their damp cheeks, as if they had at last found comfort and satisfaction (37).

[I]n the bracken I lay face downwards, pressed against the earth, watching the dewy bramble-leaves, the jewel-red leaves ... I was not unhappy. That earth was too quiescent, its skin was like my own; brown skin against white skin; and the high-stalked bracken watching. I thought it would not be bad for my child (50).

It is no linguistic slip that both of these passages describe a downward movement. As is the case in Ashton-Warner's text, subversive themes are developed through the implicit strategy of repeated imagery and symbols. The narrator is banished from the sphere of the socially acceptable due to her sexual crime, and her descriptions of nature poignantly evoke the biblical Fall. In a transgressive response, therefore, the narrator chooses a pagan worship of 'woman earth' (11) over the patriarchal religious doctrines which have alienated her:

I am not a Christian. It is the four seasons that wax and wane in me, it is autumn that hangs so heavily golden-ripe, spring that is pallid and fretful and full of a strangeness of cherry flowers (37).

The second citation also displays an eroticism which combats the passive feminine sexuality controlled and mediated by men. Indeed, it bears a striking resemblance to the sexual dialectic evidenced in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's image of the river. In both cases, nature as Other reflects and interpenetrates with the narrator's self, instead of representing a separate masculine counterpart. In Hyde's text, a more radical innovation is

incorporated into the imaged sexual dynamic, as the narrator locates herself *above* this Other. Furthermore, the conventional masculine element is finally ejected from the scene in a repudiation of the speculative gaze. The narrator is watched only by an environment which has been portrayed as an extension of her female self, and in which her unborn child completes a unified picture of women's experience.

As a social individual, however, the narrator cannot suppress undertones of nostalgia for human opportunities lost. After the experience of pregnancy, she appears to effect a complete denial of her sexuality, and to desire regression to a childlike state outside of the socio-sexual economy from which she has been expelled. Correspondingly, nature is desexualised, or evoked through images of dryness and colourlessness:

I became less than a woman again, a figure attached to white trees and crackling leaves ... I was happy then, and companionless (*Home*, 30).

The desire to erase all traces of an inherently profane, adult self, and the projection of this on to the natural macrocosm, is eerily reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Like Hyde's narrator, the fictional Tess finds some relief in her rural surroundings during her pregnancy, and the authorial voice approves her situation through naturalist philosophy. Thus, Hardy intrudes somewhat didactically to assert that '[s]he had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment'.¹⁸¹ In both cases, the female protagonists move from a fertile, abundant landscape to an arid environment only as a reflection of the *social* reproval accompanying illegitimate childbirth, and of an ensuing feeling of universal rejection.¹⁸² Unwittingly, therefore, the narrator of *A Home in this World* mirrors the very fate of literary heroines which she has tried to redress.

I have indicated that *A Home in this World* attempts to proffer alternative options to *status quo* renditions of reality, with its constituent determinants of rationality and social acceptability. The autobiography also utilises certain stylistic and structural techniques in order to consolidate the attempt at destabilising established sureties. The ambiguity and contradiction inherent in Hyde's metaphors of freedom, entrapment and nature are just such a travesty of objective, logical discourse. Use of an emotive tone throughout the work aids this rebellion, through the deliberate promotion of

¹⁸¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London: Penguin, 1987) 135.

¹⁸² Cf. Hardy, *Tess*: the Talbothay Dairy and Flintcomb-Ash sections.

intimacy and revelation, and a mining of the same excess that was criticised in Ashton-Warner's work. There is a definite pride in Hyde's claim that '[t]ragedy couldn't either laugh so much as I do, or weep so much' and that it is 'mildly romantic' to 'go through life like a cumulus cloud, swollen with rain, always bursting into tears when least expected or desired...' (21, 26). Crucially, Hyde exploits such tactics *despite* the conscious realisation that such emotional overspill will inevitably be condemned by public and literary propriety. Her autobiographical act is privy to the fact that 'most of the important things we ever say are stammered out in a rage or in a crisis, *and thus put aside* (15, emphasis added). As I elaborated earlier, the seeping out of that which has been defined as invisible necessitates a second rejection. In other words, patriarchy precludes women's rebellious discourse by terming it hysterical anti-narrative.

On the structural level, the autobiography makes historical linearity redundant in a more decisive manner than does that of Ashton-Warner. *A Home in this World* is composed of a series of vignettes, or illustrations without definite borders.¹⁸³ It could even be described as a series of 'Cameo Tales', as the chapters are, in Hyde's definition of the term, 'small and mostly of a tragical nature' (21). The chapters are not consistently titled, and the first draws attention to the irregular temporal structure of the text with its present tense 'Just Now'. *A Home in this World* begins in the fairly conventional mode of the present perspective of writing. However, it then forsakes the usual, linear progression for an outward-moving reminiscence upon the immediate, and then more distant, past. Such a denial of the traditional childhood-to-present pattern removes the text from the traditional generic characteristics of autobiography.¹⁸⁴

Hyde strives for an informal stream-of-consciousness technique which bears a close resemblance to the diary form. Like Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past", this text uses the present of writing as a platform from which to view memories of essences rather than facts. These memories then act as catalytic nodes around which subsidiary memories and general observations are made. The resulting temporal oscillation, or movement between barely defined and tenuously bound frames, renders elusive an historical order. Again, the text approximates that of Woolf's, which markets itself by both title and structure as an informal, meandering reminiscence, and is in actuality a

¹⁸³ *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1984 843.

¹⁸⁴ James Olney, for example, dictates a 'formal device of recapitulation and recall' in his definition of 'autobiography proper'. See "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography", Olney 251.

highly complex pattern of symbols, foreshadowing, and gradually revealed significances.

For example, Hyde uses a circuitous revelation of detail to hint at the conception of an illegitimate child before revealing the fact. In the middle of a lengthy opening memory of the asylum (which constitutes the immediate past), she proffers '[m]en are so nimble...' (15), a hint which only assumes contextual relevance in the light of her later revelation. The episode closes upon Hyde's support of the asylum as an alternative to women's 'household associations' (23), but still the secret is withheld. Confrontation with the topic of her pregnancy seems imminent in the following chapter:

I think, to change the subject, that there is a moment in the life of most people when all their associations ... stand up around them like the hosts of dead silvery trees one sees in the New Zealand bush ... Well, so the past can be; the people you loved, the people you lived with, the people you quarrelled with, the people whose business throats you would have cut, given an opportunity - all standing around you, skeleton silvery trees.

It is not a healthy state of affairs. It existed for me in Wanganui, seven years ago ... (26).

Yet the presentation of this flashback disconcerts the reader on a number of levels. Firstly, the passage is written in an abstract manner encouraged by the generalised reference to 'you'. Use of the present tense aids the casual, indirect manner in which the memory is approached. Secondly, the catalyst for the retrospective glance is not the scene of the trees, as it appears, but a dead musk rat's tail which the narrator found in a drawer at some unspecified time. As it is from *this* memory that she wishes to 'change the subject', the impact is similar to changing a lens from long to short distance. Yet the focus remains blurred, as the reason behind her 'state of affairs' (and motivation of the passage) is not revealed here but subsequently, in a casual joke about dating: "'I *must* confess ... hold this baby." Squalling sin dumped, wet-napkined, on the knee of surprised young man' (28).

Sandra Gilbert asserts that 'women writers have frequently responded to sociocultural restraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession'.¹⁸⁵ Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman*, as I have indicated, clarifies the symbolic referent as the ace of the unconscious in conventional narratives. Hyde's key symbols, however, are sufficiently visible and repetitive to suggest their *deliberate*

⁵ Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want?" 35.

usage as indicators of women's experience. Chapter One of her autobiography is representative of an organisation of the narrative around symbolic tropes, opening as it does in *medias res* with the sentence '[i]f only there were a fire' (3). This image summarises both the thematic thrust and the purpose of Hyde's autobiographical gesture, which is to create a personal time or space, 'a port in a storm', and 'a home in this world' (3, 10). Such a metaphor expresses the desire not only for space and self-sufficiency, but for movement outward into communality and human warmth:

[t]his is my fire ... There would be no trouble in this room, but no stinginess of soul either. No somebody on the inside and somebody, cut off, outside. One wouldn't stand outside on a little island of safety, cut off from the rest of humanity (4).

The metaphor of the fire is then broadened into that of the room or home, with the broader implications of both a starting point for writing and an opening for communication. Once again, the dynamic associated with the image is one of a progression through the private to the public:

I want a sort of natural order and containment, a centre of equipoise, an idea - not a cell into which one can retreat, but a place from which one can advance (10).

The Utopian symbol of 'home' is a necessary prerequisite for the release of 'a fertility and a richness untapped' (11), an example of which is the artistic representation of women's experience. In particular, a benevolent social setting must facilitate autobiography in its move from the private to the public sphere. The completion of the symbolic pattern thus indicates that women's discourses are fostered by a sense of belonging. Like Ashton-Warner, Hyde experiences divergent pulls towards both love and care, and the isolation required for artistic production. Crucially, both writers strive towards a mutually beneficial interplay of these drives rather than the sacrifice of one for the other. Hyde is distinctive, however, in her attempts to refute art as an esoteric luxury or means of escapism. Rather, she writes in order to bear witness as one of the socially marginalised. In particular, the narrator explicitly states the desire to aid a silent audience comprising women who have suffered similar ordeals, or to write an alternative women's story.

Such a reading fleshes out Hyde's definition of 'freedom' so that it becomes a space of personal contentment and social acceptability, and a moment at which the interior, experiential self ceases to chafe against the

socially imposed mirrors of woman. In this manner, the author predicates an alternative to the shackles of marriage and duty which conscribe women in conventional society. Of her ideal 'home', she writes:

I don't mean four walls and a roof on top, though even these I have never had ... As often as not, though, four walls and a roof get in the way, are the very point where one is fatally side-tracked from ever having a home in this world (10).

As is consistent throughout the chosen texts, Hyde recognises the socially induced incompatibility of the identities of woman and artist. She continuously strives, therefore, to create strategic retreats on the social hinterland, ranging from an isolated bach to the psychiatric asylum. Indeed, the latter is cited as a potentially ideal *locus* for 'recovering women, for once free of their household associations, who should have been at the most critical point in their lives, the place where they could think before they went on' (23-4). Again, the emphasis is on rest before progression, isolation followed by outward movement.

In Chapter Two, I interpreted the symbolic denouement to Hyde's text as a recognition and concomitant rejection of a matrilineal heritage of silence. The narrator as daughter thus transforms the gift of narrative given by the negative role model of her mother into a commitment to discourse and story. Yet under a less optimistic reading, the concluding metaphor may signal despair, or submission to those dictates which have traditionally confined women's lives and voices. As such, the mother serves as a reminder of her daughter's inevitable silencing and conscription to household chores. The title's chapter 'Letting Go' may then be a synopsis of the narrator's imminent physical and psychological breakdown:

[y]ou are taking drugs, eating cold poison ... Yes: I started, in a weary, half-broken body, job hunting three weeks after childbirth, racked with anxiety and with exile, horribly overworked, horribly overtired, ever since ... Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Which came first, taking drugs, or being so deadly tired and knowing a crash is straight ahead? (99).

In the most tragic final chapter of the autobiographies dealt with in this study, the narrator asks a series of unanswerable questions which implicate herself as culprit. It is noteworthy, however, that Hyde continued to write fiction after the completion of her autobiography in 1937.¹⁸⁶ This casts doubt upon my

¹⁸⁶ Challis ix. Hyde subsequently wrote *Nor the Years Condemn*, *Dragon Rampant*, some of *Telephone in Winter*, and various short stories (see xviii-xx).

default hypothesis that the locking away of her mother's story is a symbolic foreshadowing of her own abdication from writing. Indisputably, however, the passage emphasises the level of despondency which is required in order to seek respite through the abdication of self-determination, as offered by both drug usage and psychiatric incarceration. Hyde's period at the Lodge, although in truth voluntary, was instigated at a point of crisis proven by her attempt at suicide by drowning.¹⁸⁷ Without an absolute erasure of the *bios* from the *graphie* in an interpretation of this work, it is difficult to comfortably align such a 'state of complete despair'¹⁸⁸ with the feminist agendas *promoting* madness.

I have discussed madness as *one* embodiment of female difference and creativity, suggesting its positive significations as a rebuttal to the dismissive and appropriative readings of social institutions. Certainly, women's discourse will remain associated with psychosis until their public and literary voices attain the cultural status of normality. As Shoshana Felman succinctly summarises:

[t]he woman is 'madness' to the extent that she is Other, *different* from man ... What the narcissistic economy of the Masculine universal tries to eliminate, under the label 'madness', is nothing other than *feminine difference*.¹⁸⁹

Read alone, however, such a theory does not convey the full implications behind the dialectic of madness and its illustrative discourses. The motivations behind women's appropriation of the pejorative label of madness must also be closely monitored. As Phyllis Chesler explains, the various forms of projected, public or private madness may be 'either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype'.¹⁹⁰ In other words, women writers may utilise a discourse of madness either because it is all that is made available to them, or because they are abdicating from a narrative of rationality and scientific objectivism that they find alien to their experience.

Hyde's direct and sometimes aggressive address, both to the medical authorities whom she has left and to an assumed masculine readership, underlines that the impetus for her writing is the promotion of an alternative course:

¹⁸⁷ Ibid xiv. Challis clarifies Hyde's 'few dubious weeks' (*Home*, 17) as the suicide attempt of 1933.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Felman 15.

¹⁹⁰ Chesler 75.

I am not unintelligible to you, not yet a forgotten language. Ask *them* why they talk like radios, and perhaps you will find there is more to be afraid of, behind their manner of speech, than behind mine. But before you mock anything, beware of its shades of vanished greatness, its *ka*, if you will, come back out of the soft, dark air of the tombs; not the pompous resurrection, indeed, of something mortal that glittered and strutted under the sun, but the old significance. Our speech is not the cipher, it is only the clue (94).

The narrator is tempted by membership in the masculine, romantic literary community, promoting herself as 'a poet, a dreamer and a lover' (94). Yet the passage above replaces this form of self-empowerment with loyalty to an antecedent tradition. The symbol of the tombs, at once gynec and maternal (wombs), is valorised above the public 'pompous' figure, a symbol connected to the loudspeaker, and also reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's phallic 'I' which casts its shadow autocratically over the page.¹⁹¹ And the 'old significance' is that which is the precursor to all other traditions, the original creator from which public figures are born, the emblematic *mother*. The language of the Other, expressed through the narratives of the literary outcasts who are the mad, the female and the maternal, is not the 'cipher' through which sane men can narcissistically read their difference and their normality. Rather, such narratives are a 'clue' to the contents of the shadow which lies beneath the phallogocentric monolith, the space of pre-historic, culturally *silenced* women's narratives. *A Home in this World* thus vividly evokes Irigaray's title epigraph to this thesis, in a model which contrasts the unitary patriarchal discourse with the muted, maternal gap beneath it. This metaphor also lends support to the more affirmative reading of the text's ending, as an acknowledgment of and growth from the silenced maternal narrative.

The trace of madness in imagery, symbol, style and structure has hitherto provided an impetus for a rich reinterpretation of women's literature. However, as Nina Baym suggests, we must avoid conflating an academic platform of female madness with a 'revalorisation of traditional "female" stereotypes'.¹⁹² To be equally evaded is a prescriptive feminist agenda of 'madness, antireason, primitive darkness, mystery' which does not question the historical assumptions of synonymity between women and such

¹ Woolf, *Room* 108. Hyde's model also closely resembles Woolf's in her definition of the ershadowed female Other. Compare Hyde's usage of 'shades' to Woolf's 'in the shadow of the letter 'all is shapeless as mist'.

² Baym, "Madwoman" 49.

characteristics.¹⁹³ Each of these negative halves of the binary equation should be revealed as the products of culturally suppressing the female Other, rather than being lauded as inherent characteristics of women's psychology and discourse.

I also suspect a danger in the exploitation of madness in a behavioural sense. Only critical naïvety can promote the causes and effects of actual psychological disorder. Hyde's text emphasises that the exploitation of psychological distress as justification for social abdication has serious side-effects. The pro-active seizure of masks which society thrusts upon one does not make those masks any easier to remove. As these two authors reveal, to successfully manipulate madness without falling prey to its potential reality demands an absolute cultural desensitisation, which is impossible. For Hyde, psychological breakdown obviously lurked as a possible answer to social disease. Yet the biographical fact that this sometime refuge eventuated in her suicide at the age of thirty-three, indicates the potential fatality of such a solution.

If we uncritically conflate psychosomatic communication and women's psychological disorder, then we constantly constrain women's voices within the boundaries of their bodies and within a prescribed form of writing. Rather we should hope that hysteria is defunct, a dinosaur left behind in the feminist seizure of public and political discourse. Invoking Freud's Dora once again, Baym summarises that:

[o]ne might say that the obedient daughter who could only speak through and with her body, and who was released into speech by Freud thus becoming his creation, gave way to or was supplanted by the rebellious daughter who dared to match him word for word.¹⁹⁴

If we are to approach women's texts from a critical angle unsullied by conventional assumptions, then the term madness should be made redundant, not revered. Women may have to re/sign themselves to the idea that the power of their own voices will seduce the literary, critical and theoretical fathers. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, however, they must propound a *re-terming* of those characteristics in their matrilineal heritage which have traditionally been condemned as irrational, nonsensical and eccentric. Once cultural and literary constructions of rationality, reality and value have been dismantled, we may finally promote as *normal* the

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid 53.

difference, the other, and the multiple which shelter beneath the stereotype of women's inscription.

**Between the I(s)-Land and the Mirror
City:
Language as Mythic Space
in Janet Frame's *An Autobiography***

*'yet, this is what we must seek: a reconciliation
between reality and men, between description and
explanation, between object and knowledge'*
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

*'I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no
one knows which I, more or less human, but alive
because of transformation'*
Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

The previous chapters in this thesis have foregrounded the interplay between maternal and paternal heritages, and the ensuing genesis of narrative discourses available to the woman writer in her negotiations with subjectivity, identity and corporeality. As is characteristic of the texts under surveillance, Janet Frame's autobiographical trilogy is circular in its retrospective movement towards language and identity.¹⁹⁵ Yet Frame's work veers away from a gendered model of inheritance, and substitutes the postmodern referent of language *per se*. *An Autobiography* is informed throughout, therefore, by the constant dialogism of subject and text. Inseparable and interchangeable, the persona and her use of language move in a complex dialectic of inside and outside, alienation and belonging, so that the metaphoric locus to which the narrator escapes is paradoxically her point of entry into culture, history and the world of reality. Frame writes from the fulcrum of deconstructive thought, perceiving that language is rooted in, but simultaneously creates, perceptual realities. Her primary aim is not to deny "t the self is always already constructed in language, but to transcend this a trap.

Compare Simon Petch, "Janet Frame and the Languages of Autobiography", *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 5 (Spring 1991) 60: 'the autobiographical act is a continuous re-making of a ie of contingency, which is itself an endlessly provisional reconstitution of selfhood and identity'.

Such a positive transformation is achieved through the gradual movement towards myth,¹⁹⁶ a trajectory which forms the substructure to the oscillations of the narrator in her encounters with language. Frame hypothesises that myth not only formulates the underwritten history of every text and every voice, but provides the key to a future of endless possibility. In choosing the self-determining, personal myth which is autobiography, the author has already become the active agent in her encounters with her identity and its constituent language. Yet Frame consciously exploits the genre, by wielding the autobiographical mirror in order to dazzle. *An Autobiography* de-gen(d)erates the culturally inherited and imposed myths of role and place which construct her as object and as victim. Yet, as my interpolation suggests, the deconstructive primacy given to language necessitates the removal of gender from the equation of identity, subjectivity and narrative. Frame's narrative *does* sing of an ever-transforming 'I'. The divergence from Cixous's model occurs, however, when we attempt to graft her language on to a female body.

The autobiographical mirror which Frame holds up to herself exposes the fragmented chaos of a self perpetually on the margins. Much of the organising structure of the narrative consists of a progression towards resolution. This movement is enacted through various myths or disguises of the self, all constructed out of language and/or silence. The mythic 'Mirror City', which serves as a metaphor for the imagination, represents the positive transformation of the narrator's relation to reality. Yet the import of this denouement is not to strip away narrative masks, but to finally shroud the author in an all-encompassing language. The autobiographical text itself is finally decoded as a mirror or mask which deflects the reader ever further from the background author.

Through the continual positing of alternative fictions of self, then, *An Autobiography* traces the shattering of a conventionally unified self. Concurrently, the text moves toward a gradual reassembling of the disparate parts into a more self-sufficient identity. Despite its invisibility to the reader, the author posits this identity as more authentic. Through her negative experiences in and on the margins of society, the narrator learns that internalised myths of the self can become both enslaving and suicidal. Yet a recognition of the inevitability of the mythic dynamic, and the positive application or displacement of it in writing, enables a harmonious bridging of the worlds of reality and imagination, fact and fiction, self and language. It is

⁹⁶ Ibid.

only when she *is* artist, in the sense of achieving permanent and privileged access to the world of the imagination, that she can discard her role-playing as artist, among other things. The narrative turns upon the narrator's conversion from a passive acceptor of socially-legislated difference to an active agent of linguistic *différance*. Ultimately, she can display herself in a mirror which denies the traditionally unified 'I' of identity and the static 'is' of that identity's presence in the world. Frame's ultimate persona is the manipulator of the very reflector which she holds to herself.

An Autobiography discredits absolute systems such as fundamental identity and factual history. Instead, a vital acknowledgement takes place of coexistent dichotomies such as truth and fiction, thus valorising the compromise which is myth. We may define myth as a composite of fictionalised fact, and not as a wholesale replacement but rather a *reconstruction* of history. The work of Roland Barthes encapsulates such definition:

[m]yth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession; it is an inflexion.¹⁹⁷

Under such a reading, we may align the tenets of the mythic genre with those of the postmodern autobiographical project. By inscribing an imaginative, recollective response to her own factual history, Frame initiates a similar process of creation as those who contribute to the cultural repository of myths through a combination of observable fact and retrospective speculation. In response, by authorising this part-truth, part-fictional *mélange* of myth, we can circumvent the inevitable theoretical impulse to order by positing autobiography as neither a traditional nor a philosophically impossible (postmodern) history, but as a reconstructing history of the individual and the society in which she moves. Thus, study of the text is limited neither to the search for empirical truths, nor by the preconception that all historical narrative is inherently flawed by fictionalisation. In *An Autobiography*, the fusing of historical fact and fiction serve as a parallel to the conclusion towards which the text works, the metamorphosis of present and future reality into fiction through the lens of the imagination.

It was postulated in Chapter One that as *graphie* is by definition an artificial construct, the autobiographer achieves at best an elision or

¹⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1972) 140.

concealment of the gap between 'life' as it occurred and 'self' as one was, and the mirror image in writing which is flawed by memory and inevitable fictionalisation. In the case of a literary autobiographer such as Frame, who evidences a heightened awareness of both the limitations and the possibilities of language, the desire to contradict cultural mirrors of self is combined with a conscious manipulation of the language informing such constructs. Indeed, each of Frame's novels incessantly 'invites the reader to plunge beneath its surface in order to examine the processes of fictionalization'.¹⁹⁸ Similarly, in Frame's case, the generic claim to autobiographical truth is most productively seen as a ruse, and the critic's dilemma is accentuated.

As the destination of Frame's autobiographical *künstlerroman*¹⁹⁹ is the mythical Mirror City, we would logically expect the point of departure to be one of fact or reality. The first part of the trilogy, *To the Is-Land*, however, opens to an awareness of the mythic aspect of all narrative, as the narrator recalls 'the reality or the myth of those ancestors' from whom she inherits her place in the world.²⁰⁰ Similarly, Mirror City, 'where the starting point is myth' (*Is-Land*, 7) is a new beginning as well as an arrival, as it symbolises the metamorphosis of one way of living into another. Sensitivity to the binary nature of myth thus underpins the entire narrative, and promotes a constant and self-conscious double voice. Through this method, the child's instinctive awareness of the world before the imposition of constructed, empirical truths is juxtaposed with the more mature authorial knowledge of the possibilities of myth-making in writing (personal) histories.

For Janet Frame's autobiographical persona(e), myth can be defined as 'a mode of perception or a way of knowing which is creative and transforming'.²⁰¹ Implementation of this philosophy is undertaken when she creates various forms of 'my place' in both instinctive childhood forms, and

¹⁹⁸ Patrick Evans, "'Farthest from the Heart': The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame", *Modern Fiction Studies* 27:1 (Spring 1981) 34.

¹⁹⁹ Suzette Henke, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Janet Frame's Autobiographies", *SPAN* 31 (Feb. 1991) 85. I borrow this term advisedly, as I believe that Frame's text fulfils all of the prerequisites of such a definition: 'the *Künstlerroman* ... represents the growth of a novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of artistic destiny and mastery of artistic craft', states M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988) 120. According to my reading, the textual end point of the Mirror City represents licitly the choice of artistry, and by its symbolic weight is an example of Frame's artistic craft.

Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land* (Auckland: Random Century, 1989). Subsequent references to the trilogy composing *An Autobiography* will be parenthetically included in the body of the text as follows: *the Is-Land* = *Is-Land*, *An Angel at my Table* = *Angel*, *The Envoy from Mirror City* = *Mirror*.

Petch 60.

more strategic adolescent retreats. From an early age, the most consistently chosen refuge is that of the transformative mind:

[m]y only escape was within myself, to 'my place', within an imagination that I was not even sure that I possessed, but where I hoped to avoid the praising, blaming scrutiny of others (*Is-Land*, 108).

In the final volume, the narrator finds a more permanent 'place' in the imagination and converts the trope from one of defensive refuge to one of affirmation and transcendence. The metaphoric 'Mirror City' which she constructs is 'a *locus* of which she is the *genius*, a hoard of secret identity through which she transcends her social being'.²⁰² Eventually she can conclude that '[n]ow that writing was my only occupation, regardless of the critical and financial outcome, I felt I had found my 'place' at a deeper level than any landscape of any country could provide' (*Envoy*, 415). This point of arrival is one of memory and imagination, which transform history and reality respectively through the medium of language. She has thus attained a mythic perspective which allows her not to escape but to transcend her experience of cultural myths concerning class, gender, sanity and self-worth. As I have suggested, the self-determining exploitation of personal mythmaking eventually allows her to endlessly recreate herself through a positive and powerful use of language.

Janet Frame vicariously experiences the transformative dynamic through her natural surroundings, and later consciously applies such techniques to her writing. In the final volume, imagination and memory expressly connect temporal frames at the nexus of nature. Commenting on a 'pine-bordered beach' in Ibiza, Spain, the narrator articulates her personal and autobiographical philosophy:

[n]ot an unusual scene but, as in my visits to the pine forests of the interior, it touched the antenna reaching from childhood, just as childhood contains its own antennae originating in conception and the life of the dead and the newly begun; and feeling the sensation at the nerve ending and its origin in the past among the pine trees and sky and water and light, I made this scene a replacement, a telescoping with the trained economy of memory, so that from then and in the future the memory of this scene contains the collective feeling of those past, and now when I listen to pine trees by water, in light and blue, I feel the link, the fullness of being and loving and losing and wondering, the spinning 'Why was the world?'

Ibid 61.

that haunted me in childhood, the shiver of yesterday, yet
I remember the pine trees of Ibiza (*Envoy*, 338-9).

The theory, reminiscent of the unconscious or 'involuntary memory' preferred by Proust,²⁰³ promotes nature as the vessel which holds and joins all unconscious memory and gives continuity to life. Nature thus serves a parallel function to the imagination, as a catalyst which jolts the narrator into the substructure of her own experience. And, as do literature and the imagination, certain natural phenomena act as touchstones for linking the personal and the universal experience, inculcating a feeling of belonging. The interchange in her life between alienation and belonging, despair and contentment are given the universal or macrocosmic perspective of 'alternating moments of the sun's warmth and the chill and despair of losing the sun and waiting for its return', so that her life is one 'supervised, blessed and made lonely by the sky' (*Envoy*, 363). The narrator's use of pathetic fallacy is reassuring in that reference to natural cycles gives both order and meaning to the movement of her life. And it is not only the self-sufficient unity of the natural system, but also the cohering influence of nature upon her vision of temporal frames, that is inspirational to a forming literary consciousness.

This form of referencing the self by nature, however, can represent a passive stance which the narrator attempts to overcome in her movement toward imaginative creativity. For Frame, the mythic vision is a test, not of one's sensitivity towards heightened moments such as the above, but of one's *continuous* ability to transform experience:

[i]t is the events of living that are not easily recognized as legends and part of myths that are the test of the value of lifelong tenancy in Mirror City; and it is the discovery of the new legends and myths that keeps building, renewing the city (*Envoy*, 383).

To extrapolate, she believes that the gift of the artist lies less in an ability to *perceive* existing myths such as those based on the natural cycle, than in the capacity to *transmute* everyday events of life into an imaginative fiction or philosophy. And, in a reversed movement, the organic growth of a personal mythological structure sustains the artist as a 'rich and imaginative form of life

²⁰³ Marcel Proust believed that certain catalytic moments, such as that of tasting a 'madeleine' inspired what he termed the 'involuntary memory', or a spontaneous recollection of equivalent instances in the past. Proust opposed this to voluntary or 'artificial' memory and used it as the structuring mechanism of his autobiographical fiction. See Marcel Proust, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954).

in a world grown pale, mechanical and abstract',²⁰⁴ or in one which alienates the artistic consciousness.

Frame's autobiographical works, whilst moving towards integration and transformation, are haunted by the notion of 'woman alone' in a society which precludes the reconciliation of personal integrity and social masks. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the trajectory of the narrator's life moves from a sense of belonging, 'I felt I *was* the world' (*Is-Land*, 13), to a maturing perspective of empathy with 'all the outcast victims of misfortune' (34). The exile from a state in which the I experiences itself as both clearly defined (*I*) and firmly rooted in the world (*Is*) is catalysed by a growing realisation of her social handicap which is poverty, and her family's socially marginal status. This is exacerbated by a breakdown within the island of the family which is effected by the death of her two sisters and her brother's epilepsy. The narrator's resulting feeling of alienation is evoked vividly in a description of schoolyard politics:

[s]trangely enough ... my consuming longing, in the midst of the shock of sickness in the family, was to be invited to join in the wonderful skipping games played by the rest of the class with a brand-new, golden-knotted rope owned and controlled by one of the girls (*Is-Land*, 39).

As the line of exclusion, the skipping rope contains those of privilege and is a coveted object for those which are not included in its magical rotations. Frame thus symbolically invokes the dialectic of centre and margin, communality and alienation, privilege and exclusion.

In hindsight, however, the narrator aligns her non-conformism to and exclusion from New Zealand society with her fundamental identity as an artist:

it was best to escape from a country where, since my student days, a difference which was only myself, and even my ambition to write, had been looked on as evidence of abnormality (*Angel*, 284).

As Lawrence Jones suggests, for the New Zealand autobiographer there is only one story, 'that of the artist's struggle to find a "place" (often literal as well as figurative) in a hostile provincial environment'.²⁰⁵ Patrick Evans notes that

William Richter, *Myth and Literature* (London: Routledge Keagan Paul, 1975) 31.

Lawrence Jones, "The One Story, Two Ways of Telling, Three Perspectives: Recent New Zealand Literary Autobiography", *ARIEL* 16:4 (Oct. 1985) 127. This article is interesting in its discussion of point, but tends towards pedantry in its classification of autobiographies into overarching time-ness such as 'provincial' and 'post-provincial'.

two of Frame's novels, *A State of Siege* (1967) and *The Rainbirds* (1969) are explicitly 'parables of herself as an artist and an outsider'.²⁰⁶ The myth of the 'bird, hawk, bogie' created by Janet Frame in a childhood story and used in a slightly different form in *To the Is-Land* (15), is a metaphor for the plight of the sensitive or exceptional individual in New Zealand. In this scenario, the child is the vulnerable bird attacked by an uncreative society and by death, and saved by the 'bogie' of art.²⁰⁷ Frame's autobiographical narrative supports this point:

[a]rt and beauty cannot control nature (and its agents, Time and Death), but they can see it in all its beauty and terror, with something like 'the point of view of angels' (*Angel*, 153).

Art, then, cannot control society but *can* provide a tool with which to view it in some detached fashion.²⁰⁸ However, the privileged perspective afforded by art is also dangerous, as it marks the difference of the individual from the 'normal' vision of the world. An apt invocation of this point is made when the narrator's quotation of Woolf's 'a peanut-buttery smell' is used against her as evidence, not of her literary erudition, but of schizophrenia (*Angel*, 213).

Indeed, the path towards the mythic and artistic philosophy is fraught with false starts and misleading solutions. The narrator senses precociously that she is a palimpsest upon which appropriate social masks are inscribed. Her teething attempts to subvert this through the active use of self-defining techniques take the form of disguises or masks which trap the narrator in the dichotomy of refuge/trap. She is thus repeatedly caught in myths and mirrors of her own making. This technique is spawned when the teenage narrator assumes the mask of 'original' and gifted eccentric at school to cover her shyness and exclusion from the skipping games (*Is-Land*, 109). She then

²⁰⁶ See Patrick Evans in "Janet Frame and the Art of Life", *Meanjin* 44:3 (Sept. 1985) 376 for a criticism of 'that special contempt a smug, conservative rural community reserves for those who are in any way different from the rest'. Evans notes that Frame's novel *Intensive Care* also deals with 'the aridity of New Zealand life, its fear of the imaginative and the artistic of the regimentation and suppressed violence of a society that is, in Kenneth Smithyman's phrase, a 'death-centred democracy'" (380). See also Monique Malterre, "La recherche de l'identité dans *A State of Siege* de Janet Frame", *Études Anglaises* 25:2 (1972) 236. Malterre summarises *A State of Siege* as the exploration of a night of crisis through the eyes of a woman who is philosophically atypical due to her vocation as painter.

²⁰⁷ Robin Dudding (ed.), "Janet Frame" in *Beginnings: New Zealand Writers Tell How They Began Writing* (Wellington: Oxford UP, 1980) 27. See also Evans, "Janet Frame" 377 on the depiction of childhood in *Owls Do Cry*: "the assumption here is basically romantic, that children possess a spontaneity of seeing and living that is dinned out of them as they grow older. As the novel develops the four Withers children move inexorably towards the sterility of their parents". Evans 376 cites the fall from innocence in *Owls Do Cry* as the most common theme in New Zealand fiction.

²⁰⁸ Jones 143.

attempts to imitate her classmate Shirley in assuming the literary persona of a 'poet', or *acting as an artist*:²⁰⁹

I was overcome with envy and longing. Shirley had everything a poet needed plus the tragedy of a dead father. How could I ever be a poet when I was practical, never absentminded, I liked mathematics, and my parents were alive? Well, I thought, if I can't be the necessary dreamer, I can at least pretend, and so I wrote a poem about dreams, believing that if I used the word *dream* repeatedly in some way I would be creating dreams ... How could anyone, reading those lines, deny I was a dreamer? (*Is-Land*, 93).

The narrator's recognition of the deceptive power of language at this point contradicts her own unquestioning trust in words. Her desire to find a place limits her as a victim to social definitions and stereotypes even while she attempts to manipulate the vehicle of such dictates. Through the creation of like personae, the narrator develops a formulae for gaining both the protection of an image and a social link with others. Simultaneously, however, it launches her upon a deceptive path leading to the label of madness, in which her constructed images of self dramatically backfire because they are taken seriously.

Subsequently exiled from her familiar surroundings and prohibited from the Otago University student stereotype by shyness, the narrator of *An Angel at my Table* experiences an increasing personal nihilism. Through silence, reclusion and the self-denial of food she deliberately and meticulously projects an image of 'the quiet, shy teacher, no trouble, no trouble at all' (*Angel*, 183). It is during this period that the narrator fully develops the technique of conscientiously weaving the costumes of her personae out of both language and silence. When relating her University experience to her parents she uses the mask of the collective 'we' whilst painfully aware of the gap between the other students and her self: '...in order to survive I had to conceal my "I", what I really felt, thought and dreamed about. I had moved from the second person plural to a shadowy "I", almost a nothingness, like a no-woman's land' (*Angel*, 161).²¹⁰ Pertinently, her efforts toward invisibility include a refusal to eat publicly, and a resultant desperation

⁹ Henke 87.

⁰ See also *Angel* 154: 'The gradual learning of the language, the attitudes, customs of behaviour and ess; produced in me a euphoria of belonging which was intensified and contradicted by my actual eling of isolation'.

for food reminiscent of anorexia.²¹¹ Such a response hints at the all-encompassing definitions of propriety surrounding women's social behaviour. It also suggests an attempted de-sexualisation of the female body, or an assertion of self as 'no(n)- woman'.

Too late, Frame's narrator realises that through role-playing she has 'woven herself into a trap, remembering that a trap is also a refuge' (*Angel*, 213):

I had woven so carefully, with such close texture, my visible layer of 'no trouble at all' ... that even I could not break the thread of the material of my deceit ... Temporary masks, I knew, had their place; everyone was wearing them, they were the human rage; but not masks cemented in place until the wearer could not breathe and was eventually suffocated (*Angel*, 188).

The ultimate irony lies in her inscription of the suicide attempt, the very bravado of which leads to her mental incarceration:

I wrote at the end of my autobiography, 'Perhaps I should mention a recent attempt at suicide...', describing what I had done but, to make the attempt more impressive, using the chemical term for aspirin - *acetylsalicylic acid* (*Angel*, 189).

In a climactic incident, her abrupt departure from teaching a class in front of the dreaded Inspector marks the casting off of disguise and the resumption of silence. And the resultant chasm of self-exposure necessitates the donning of a new mask of madness in an attempt to re/cover some sense of identity.²¹²

Insanity represents to Frame a tool to be manipulated at will: 'if necessary I could use my schizophrenia to survive', says the narrator (*Angel*, 212). However, the desperate pride of the statement is dogged by the ironic undertones of an author who nearly met her nemesis by these means. The authorial voice is both uncharacteristically intrusive and scathing about New Zealand psychiatric institutions. Therefore, some self-empowerment is suggested by the fact that the experts are deluded by the persona's role-playing, and the patient-doctor hierarchy of knowledge is subverted. However, her enslavement to this act out of a perceived lack of choice undermines such an artificial inversion of power. Appropriate to Frame's depiction of madness, as to that of Robin Hyde, is R. D. Laing's description of schizophrenia as 'a

¹ Henke 90 concurs that '[s]urely she was driven by masochistic motives, if not by anorexia'. See "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman".

² Henke 91.

special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unbearable situation'.²¹³ As I discussed in Chapter Four, feminist writers such as Phyllis Chesler have seized on this idea of conceptual madness as a paradoxical choice made by women in response to social dis-ease.²¹⁴ Chesler contends that since women who deviate from the narrow range of socially acceptable behaviour are quickly labelled insane, madness as a conscious choice may be the only response (albeit a negative one) to these limited alternatives.²¹⁵ Thus, as does Robin Hyde, Janet Frame preempts the label of madness in order to gain some control over those who would name her.

Again, the exploitation of language by Frame's narrator increases her bondage to this new mask. Such an orchestrated attempt at participation in everyday social patterns of behaviour creates a pathos which is accentuated when it aspires towards romantic ends. Thus, she uses both lies and her knowledge of literature to hold the interest of a man whom she admires, her lecturer John Forrest: '...because I wanted these "talks" to continue, I built up a formidable schizophrenic repertoire ... Usually I incorporated in the fantasy details of my reading on schizophrenia' (*Angel*, 201). In a world in which the narrator feels herself to be naked, exposed and solitary, schizophrenia is simultaneously a welcome name to be boxed up in, a connecting social mechanism, and a romanticised drama which links her to figures such as Van Gogh:

[m]y place was set, then, at the terrible feast. I had no illusions about 'greatness' but at least I could endow my work and - when necessary - my life with the mark of schizophrenia (*Angel*, 201).

For a large proportion of her life, schizophrenia acts as something which both outlines her as special and is her subscription to an artistic heritage. As in her schooldays under the shadow of the romantic Shirley, the narrator of *Angel* is still *acting the role* of an artist. Inevitably, of course, such a fiction becomes addictive and self-delusory, and the mask veers dangerously close to an ultimate self-defacement under the knife of lobotomy.

In *An Autobiography*, the experience of institutionalised madness is carefully distanced. Frame's mythic perspective transforms the narrator into the Promethean traveller returning from the Underworld with a new flame of knowledge. Henke compares the narrator's suicide attempt to that of Sylvia

²¹³ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Random House, 1967) 79.

²¹⁴ Fleenor 125.

²¹⁵ Chesler 31.

Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', remarking that in each case the persona underwent a spiritual resurrection and the attainment of a new vision.²¹⁶ It is clear that Frame's incarceration in various psychiatric institutions gave her an original and unusual perspective on the world which colours much of her fiction:

I inhabited a territory of loneliness which I think resembles that place where the dying spend their time before death, and from where those who do return living to the world bring inevitably a unique point of view that is a nightmare, a treasure, and a lifelong possession. At times I think it must be the best view in the world, ranging even further than the view from the mountains of love, equal in its rapture and chilling exposure...(*Angel*, 213-4).

And it is almost magically apposite that *literature* rescues her from the planned lobotomy, when she wins an award for *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (*Angel*, 222). This mythical overwriting is perhaps a means of being able to confront the cruel facts of her personal history. As Henke observes, Janet Frame consigns the actual experience of 'madness' to the limits of the text, and even in *Faces in the Water* hides it behind the protective mask of fiction.²¹⁷ To the extent that Frame includes such narrative, however, her testimony serves as an empowering strategy. Her own writing literally gets the last word over the depersonalising language of the medical institutions, both in her literary 'rescue' and in the publication of the alternative truth which is *An Autobiography*. She records ironically, however, that in the eyes of the public her artistry is constantly mistrusted as evidence rather than refutation of her madness: 'when I began to say what I *really* felt, using a simile or metaphor, an image, I saw the embarrassment in my listener's eyes - here was the mad person speaking' (*Angel*, 215).

It is thematically apt that the narrator chooses to compare her declaration by London doctors as 'sane' to an abrupt nakedness. This is a direct reversal of the conflation of madness and the female body. For Frame, schizophrenia is a garment which she has woven with language until it has become grafted on to her proper skin:

[p]erhaps I remember so vividly Dr Miller's layers of clothes worn against the winter season because I myself had suddenly been stripped of a garment I had worn for twelve or thirteen years - my schizophrenia. I remembered ... how in the midst of the agony and terror of the

Henke 91 cites Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus". See *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

Henke 93.

experience I found the unexpected warmth, comfort, protection: how I had longed to be rid of the opinion but was unwilling to part with it. And even when I did not wear it openly I always had it for emergency, to put on quickly, for shelter from the cruel world. And now it was gone, not destroyed by me and my constant pleading for 'the truth' allied to an unwillingness to lose so useful a protection, but banished officially by experts: I could never again turn to it for help (*Envoy*, 375).

Just as certification as schizophrenic had inscribed her status as non-being, so now does the erasure of it remove both the authenticating sign of her past and her practised path of communication with others. In desperate need of evidence of her own existence, the narrator makes a point of getting a photograph taken of herself once she leaves Seacliff (*Angel*, 240). The loss of the schizophrenic label also denudes the narrator of her dichotomous mark of difference from the norm and participation in the romantic, artistic world. And ultimately, it forces her to confront and to be responsible for the reality of her personal situation:

[s]chizophrenia, as a psychosis, had been an accomplishment, removing ordinary responsibility from the sufferer. I was bereaved. I was ashamed. How could I ask for help directly when there was 'nothing wrong with me'? (*Envoy*, 375)

This motif of clothing as both shelter and imprisonment is sustained throughout Frame's autobiographies. Clothing obsesses Frame because of its ability to frame an individual in a false or imposed mirror. She describes her final year at school as 'the cruellest I had known' (*Is-Land*, 133), due largely to the tight uniform which is a symbol of bondage to her childhood. Juxtaposed with this discomfort, however, is the fear of having it removed, as her outgrown uniform represents the departure from one identity and the fear of having none other to display. Such a divestment signals an increased stigma of difference, as even the badly-made uniform serves as a blanketing device which enables the young Frame to minimise her embarrassing social differences. Her childhood and Volume One thus end with the remark that 'it was around clothes that my life was suddenly centred' (*Is-Land*, 139). Characteristically, this centring is constituted around absence, as Janet cannot afford the necessary wardrobe for Teachers College. From this point, she is suspended in the paradox of a 'lifelong fascination with clothes which I longed for but never had' (*Angel*, 276). As with her 'schizophrenic fancy dress' (*Angel*, 203), once denied the badge of her uniform the narrator experiences a frightening sense of exposure and non-being.

Suzette Henke compares the narrator's uncomfortable school tunic to a nun's habit with all the associated restrictions.²¹⁸ In fact, the uniform acts as a metaphor for the social constriction of the female body. The resulting guilt and self-disgust are evidenced by the minimal narrative allocated to matters of female sexuality. As the narrator succinctly summarises about her menstruation, '[m]y shame was extreme; I concluded that I stank' (*Is-Land*, 133). The onset of menstruation, which signifies an increased stigma of difference from the masculine norm, initiates the narrator's repression of her female body. A retrospective commentary on the horrors of menstruation is more than token commentary on the sexual repression of the day. As Henke asserts, by writing-in this watershed stage at all, women writers subvert the universal banning of such subjects from the literary canon.²¹⁹ Once revealed, Janet Frame's 'dirty laundry' no longer has to be buried in the cemetery, a setting which, appropriately linked to her intimate secrets, becomes her new 'my place' as a student in Dunedin (*Angel*, 156-7). Just as it constitutes her attempt to reinscribe a previously silenced and acquiescent first-person identity, Frame's autobiography attempts to rename and reclaim her adolescence.

Nevertheless, the other head of Frame's binary dialectic rears its head. Despite the above discourse on the subject of menstruation, her embodied self remains cautiously concealed from the reader's eye. Frame's attitude toward her own physicality is reminiscent of Francis Barker's definition of a 'newly interiorised subjectivity':

[n]either wholly present, nor wholly absent, the body is confined, ignored, exscribed from discourse, and yet remains at the edge of visibility, troubling the space from which it has been banished.²²⁰

Although Barker refers to the Renaissance notion of the individual, the dynamic is applicable to the emergence of women's identity, particularly in the comparatively facilitating period which is the latter half of the twentieth century and *An Autobiography's* historical context. Such self-orientation is inextricably linked with any autobiographical act, as the individual strives towards the cohering concepts of identity, subjectivity and narrative. The critical variation of such a theory when applied to women's life stories,

²¹⁸ See Henke 88-91 for an excellent and detailed discussion of clothing and sexuality in *An Autobiography*.

²¹⁹ Ibid 89.

²²⁰ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984) 53.

however, is that limiting the drive to challenge cultural namings of women is a rejection of those factors which have been internalised as the sum of woman. And as I have expressed throughout this thesis, this sign 'woman' has been irredeemably centred in the body. Judith Butler summarises:

masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities...By defining women as 'Other', men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies ... Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself.²²¹

Mediating between essentialist conscription to, and rejection of, the female body is one of the conundrums of the feminist agenda. Minimal treatment of this body and its associative sexuality is made by each of the writers in this thesis. Such peripheralisation illustrates a common response to the crisis incurred by 'women artists' - that they constantly strive to define themselves through a cultural oxymoron.

Frame's autobiography suggests that the New Zealand artist and non-conformist is viewed as an unacceptable and even dangerous species. And this delineation of difference is accentuated when the factor of gender comes into play. Autobiographies written by women such as Janet Frame and Sylvia Ashton-Warner express a stronger sense of alienation than do the contemporary works of Charles Brasch and Frank Sargeson.²²² The former were subject to a double marginalisation; not only as artists in a culturally insensitive society, but as women in a male-dominated one.²²³ Suzette Henke, in an interesting comparison of *An Autobiography* with Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, emphasises that although '[b]oth Stephen Dedalus and the young Janet Frame are fiercely independent, perpetually marginal and always seeking a private place/space that will define them as artist/creators', Stephen can afford to feed off the difference which for Janet Frame is a constant source of humiliation, because he believes unequivocally in the revolutionary power of his thought.²²⁴ The Frame persona, on the other hand, is conscious that her status as woman will in all likelihood diminish the perceived validity of her discourse. In addition, any

Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault", *Feminism as que: On the Politics of Gender*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis:nesota UP, 1987) 133.

etch 62.

ones 142.

etch 87.

potential compatibility of her artistic dream and her gender is precluded by the expectations conscribing women. The stringent denial of physical vanity and even acceptance of her body is due to the threat of a life of domesticity which must exclude writing as a vocation.

As is consistently clear throughout my studied texts, her overarching aim is to find a physical or psychological space in which the woman and artist can cohabit, and be granted some degree of acceptability in the outside world. Again, Frame's narrator echoes the thesis of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* when she exclaims '[a] problem with such a simple solution! A place to live and write, with enough money to support myself...' (*Angel*, 224). Frame's text consolidates an awareness by these New Zealand writers that the life of a writer invokes particular social disapproval where the subject is a woman: '[e]veryone felt that it was better for me to be 'normal' and not have fancy intellectual notions about being a writer' (*Angel*, 222).

Even under the physical and financial shelter of her beneficent patriarch, Frank Sargeson, Frame's narrator is forced to deny the trappings of womanhood in order to be received as a serious writer:

I felt constantly hurt by his implied negation of a woman's body ... I felt the sadness of having moved from hospital, where it had been thought necessary to alter the makeup of my mind, to another asylum, where the desire was that my body should be of another gender. The price I paid for my stay in the army hut was the realisation of the nothingness of my body' ... He preferred me to wear slacks rather than dresses... (*Angel*, 250).

Sargeson's misogyny, although mediated by his homosexuality, is one of many denials of Frame's physical self. Yet, during this period, an instinctive protection of the narrator's writing vocation is becoming the primary motivation for the suppression of her sexuality. Later in Ibiza she realises with dismay her own unconscious strategy: 'for so long I had blocked all exits and entrances that I knew or felt that I was as sexless as a block of wood. I had smoothed myself away with veneers of protection' (*Envoy*, 343). Indeed, this is the first mention made of sexual feeling since the rejection implicit in Dr. Forrest's polite handling of her.

Characteristically, the first sexual experience in Ibiza is engineered linguistically and literarily: '...at once I drew out my favourite quotations, like confessions being cooked, shaped and set for tasting' (*Envoy*, 345). Despite a renewed awareness of the dynamic, language is employed by the narrator

as a concealing mask. Once again, this acts simultaneously as a protective and a distancing device:

I, with all my conversation during our walk, about the 'men in my life' was having a first experience and only I knew. And there was Bernard suddenly two beings, himself, and the manikin that resembled a dovecote. I felt the sadness and finality of being in the midst of a *True Romance* ('then he ... then I ...') in a white stone villa by the Mediterranean (349).

Typically, this false costume of words falls away to leave her both dissatisfied, and eventually vulnerable: 'I knew the lies were those of vanity and cowardice, of unwillingness to see my life as it had been and not as I supposed or hoped it might have been' (349-50). The pathos of the statement is achieved through the narrator's newly explicit consciousness that her fictionalising techniques are used to cover the void of human intimacy that has constituted much of her adult social life. And yet again, the deceptiveness of literature is turned upon her, as Bernard uses the languages of seduction and reassurance to lull the naïve narrator into a false sense of sexual security which results in her pregnancy.

In order to achieve some degree of reconciliation between woman and artist, individual and society, however, it is more desirable to appropriate language than to be forever *spoken by* language, and called false names. Thus, the narrator constantly strives toward repossession of the first person pronoun. At an early age, she realises that language can be used as a tool with which to deprive the individual of (her) identity. After being asked to play the piano in front of her mother's friends, 'Jessie said to Mum, "Jean's brilliant"'. Janet's response is both an instinctive understanding of and a defence mechanism against the harmful nature of others' judgments:

although I was proud of being thought 'brilliant', I wanted to hide, and, noting this, Jessie said to Mum, using that identity-destroying third person, 'She's shy' (*Is-Land*, 108).²²⁵

The submissive, I-less role is one which the maturing Frame becomes accustomed to, and is epitomised by her time as a faceless 'mental patient':

Now, as a Seacliff patient, I was again part of a group, yet more deeply

²²⁵ See also *Is-Land* 109: "'Jean's so original,'" the teacher said one day, causing me once again to feel pped by the opinion of others. I did not think of myself as original: I merely said what I thought. Yet acknowledgment of an apparent "difference" in my thinking seemed to fit in with the "difference" ... my life at home...'

alone, not even a creviced "I". I became "she", one of "them" (*Angel*, 194).²²⁶ Even her body is monopolised by the voices of others, as her lack of self-confidence renders her physical being a stranger: '[a]fter years of being in the command of others ... I was willing to accept any suggestions. Green and brown became *my* colours'. The reward is less one of emancipation than of a false sense of social acceptance: '...seeing my efforts to "make something of myself"...the waitresses were pleased. "Now you're one of us", they said' (*Angel*, 231). The episode encourages the narrator's foreclosure on a bodily consciousness which superficially allows her a sense of community, but limits her to the legislation surrounding the stereotype 'woman'. Indeed, the episode is articulated as the donning of another false mask, 'make something' indicating simultaneously an opportunity for the creation of artifact, but also the negation of such a gesture through the phrase's latent capitalist undertones.

Frame returns to language as the only potential means of transcending the constructing devices of social influence and its related bodily exploitation. The author remarks in an interview with Elizabeth Alley that the decision to write autobiography was largely motivated by the desire to repossess the first-person which was constantly denied the young Frame.²²⁷ The act of seizing language eventually becomes one of self-possession and empowerment in the sum of the autobiography, despite the false starts inculcated by fictionalisations of self during the narrative. At a precocious age, the narrator senses that she can subvert her powerlessness to a *power in language*. As has been suggested above, she also attempts abortively to seize a sexuality in language, at no time more evident than in her purchase of the *Encyclopaedia of Sex* whilst in London (*Envoy*, 371).

For Frame's narrator, coming to language is synonymous with the formation of an identity. The complication underlying her negotiation of language and self, however, lies in the split between signifier and signified, or literal and socially acceptable meaning, which she discovers in *To the Is-Land*. Later, after her attempt at suicide, the resulting euphemisms of the University authorities such as "'[w]e thought you might like to have a little rest'" (*Angel*, 190), are based on a linguistic deceit with which Janet is already

⁵ As has been discussed, however, Frame's experiences in psychiatric institutions gave her a privileged 'eye' or vision of the world which flavours many of her fictional works.

⁷ Janet Frame says that 'with the autobiography it was the desire really to make myself a first person. For many years I was a third-person - as children are. "They", "she" ... and *as probably the oppressed minority has become, "they"...*' (emphasis added). Taken from Elizabeth Alley, "An Honest Record": an Interview with Janet Frame", *Landfall* 45:2 (June 1991) 155.

familiar. At the beginning of the first volume, the narrator as a child who 'believ[es] from the beginning that words meant what they said' (*Is-Land*, 17) encounters the fundamentally manipulative nature of language in her trip to the dentist. She states in retrospect that this visit 'marked the end of my infancy and my introduction to a threatening world of contradictions where spoken and written words assumed a special power':

I have never forgotten that deception and my amazed disbelief that I could have been so betrayed, that the words 'Smell the pretty pink towel', without any hint of anything fearful happening, had been used to lure me into some kind of trap, that they had not *really* meant 'Smell the pretty pink towel', but 'I'm going to put you to sleep while I take your tooth out'. How could that have been? How could a few kind words mean so much harm? (*Is-Land*, 22-3).

The incident serves as an activator in the narrator's negotiation of the written and spoken word, initiating her into the *différance* between literal and applied or metaphorical meaning, and into the world of deliberate deceit. This is not the only time that the narrator will feel 'betrayed by [her] own adopted world of language' (*Angel*, 210). Despite its apparent insignificance, the episode at the dentist assumes perspective when we realise that it foreshadows her treatment at the hands of psychiatric institutions, where, again, words are deployed by the few in order to render the many powerless - literally, *without speech*.

Immediately following this trip to the dentist, and in a typically appropriative way, the narrator begins to utilise language in order to deceive, saying her father gave her the money she stole for chewing gum (*Is-Land*, 25), and to impress and amuse others. In hindsight, the narrator can say that at this point '[a] certain wariness, a cynicism about the ways of people and of my family, and an ability to deceive' is crystallised. Indeed, the innocence of the child that 'I was creating an occasion that would be used for many years to come' (24) refers not only to her comedy routine about a sheep, but to her assumption of social personae, born of an enlightenment about the usage of language. As I have reiterated, the pathway towards language as resolution to personal and social dislocation is made slower by traps of false usage.

In the autobiography's overarching Framework, however, the split between 'a socially-conferred and agreed meaning, and a meaning privately given and understood by the individual' leads to the foundation of a system of personal or internal myth²²⁸ which is to sustain the narrator throughout her

²²⁸ Petch 62.

life. The choice of title in this first volume, *To the Is-Land*, is the clearest example of the narrator's personal inflection of words, and refers back to her childhood insistence on pronunciation of the letter s:

'I read a story, *To the Is-Land*, about some children going to an Is-Land.'
'It's I-Land,' Myrtle corrected.
'It's not,' I said. 'It's Is-Land. It says,' I spelled the letters, 'I-s-I-a-n-d. Is-land.'
'It's a silent letter,' Myrtle said. 'Like knee.'
In the end, reluctantly, I had to accept the ruling, although within myself I still thought of it as the Is-Land (*Is-Land*, 33).

The schism between the appearance and the sound of the word indicates to the child both the inherently suspicious nature of language and its flexibility. And, just as the child continues to read the word as *is-land*, the adult writer continues to subvert the obligation to accept conventional readings and rules of words. The title thus bears the signatures of the child and the adult, both insisting on the presence of *is* but, as Simon Petch suggests, muffling the very *I* of the autobiographical act.²²⁹ The process of autobiographical fictionalisation, as I have stated, is itself a mask which allows the author to slip away unseen behind the limits of the text. The Frame inventing the title is privy to the inevitability of always living along 'the travelling network of words' (*Is-Land*, 17), and consciously puns on 'the elusive private self hidden in the interstices of a public network of discourse'²³⁰ which informs the postmodern manifesto.²³¹ Certainly, as was hypothesised in Chapter One of this discussion, the gap between signifier and signified, or truth and its vehicle language, *informs* Frame's negotiations with identity in both the living and the writing of her life.

At a stage of juvenility, the narrator of *To the Is-Land* has a heightened awareness of the construction of narrative as central to experience. Thus, she is fascinated with words such as 'decide' and 'destination': 'I was enthralled with their meaning and by the fact that [they] seemed to be part of the construction of every story' (35). This point not only emphasises Frame's sensitivity to writing as artificial construct, but dissolves

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ I tend to disagree with Patrick Evans's reading of this title as 'ice-land' ("Janet Frame" 382). Whilst the reading of the autobiography as the frozen, reflecting surface of present memory is an attractive metaphor, it is too reminiscent of the perfect, static mirroring promoted in traditional autobiographical theory. In addition, the author's true point of departure for writing, both thematically and structurally, is not the 'Is-Land' but the elusive and protean 'Mirror City'.

the boundaries between art and life, so that each individual constructs his life *as if it were fiction*. As theorist Paul de Man says, 'the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life, and ... whatever the writer does [may in fact be] governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture'.²³² The most confusing use of Frame's autobiographical mirror, therefore, is in the reflection back and forth between life and text, and their building blocks of self and language.

The author exploits her literary heritage in a similar manner to her personal use of language. For Janet Frame, literature serves as another layer of life, a substratum from which she draws both personal comprehension, perspective and solace in her everyday world of reality. In a well-known quotation, her narrator states that her approach to literature is not as an escape from the world of reality, but rather as another world entering her own:

there was no removal of myself and my life to another world; there was simply the other world's arrival into my world, the literature streaming through it like an array of beautiful ribbons through the branches of a green, growing tree... (*Is-Land*, 115).

To recapitulate on an earlier point, nature is one of the vehicles of conversion which allow the narrator to participate in a heightened form of reality. This quotation epitomises the intersection of the natural and the literary tropes in Frame's mythological structure. Just as the pine-trees of Ibiza served as the antennae for memory, so too does literature, through a metaphor of natural phenomenon, provide the writer with a unifying perspective upon reality.

Roland Barthes discusses the uncritical acceptance of myth which characterises both the writing and reading of literature:

[in *Writing Degree Zero*] I defined writing as the signifier of the literary myth, that is, as a form which is already filled with meaning and which receives from the concept of Literature a new signification.²³³

That is, by choosing to write an author exploits the resonance of the mythically loaded term Literature. This serves as a means both of aggrandising personal inscription and as a justification for writing at all, in that the author either writes within or against a substructure of already established meaning. I have already discussed Frame's early tendency to elevate the

²³² De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement", *MLN* 94 (Dec. 1979) 919.

²³³ Barthes 146.

signifier Literature, using it to denote some eyrie practicing exclusivity based on eccentricity of character rather than on technical merit. Indeed, throughout the text Frame maintains an association between Literature and a politics of inclusion which reverses her feeling of social alienation. As such, Literature as mythic superstructure invests her life as well as narrative with 'a new signification'. As I have hypothesised, language and its representative literature irrevocably replace woman as the transcendental signifier in the movement of this thesis towards the deconstructive Frame.

An excellent example of this mythologisation of personal experience into literature and a resulting signification occurs when the narrator arrives in London to find that her letter of arrival has gone astray, and that she is both homeless and alone. As Petch observes, 'life is jolted into literature'²³⁴ as she realises that this event aligns her with great female heroines such as Tess and Pamela²³⁵ and locates her amidst an entire literary tradition. This revelation, triggered automatically in a mind constantly receptive to the literary, acts cathartically to remind the narrator that she is neither alone nor her life insignificant:

[f]or a moment the loss of the letter I had written seemed unimportant beside the fictional gift of the loss as if within every event lay a reflection reached only through the imagination and its various servant languages, as if, like the shadows in Plato's cave, our lives and the world contain mirror cities revealed to us by our imagination, the Envoy (*Envoy*, 319).

Thus, literature acts for the narrator as personal myth by being an 'underground network of reference' which both places and sustains the self.²³⁶ Yet, in a useful comparison with Hyde's references to literary heroines, Frame does not read the experience as part of a *gendered* learning experience. As I suggested in Chapter Two, Frame promotes language and sacrifices the female body, in an attempt to reverse the model of her mother's consignment to domesticity.

However, the move towards myth inevitably comprises a deconstruction of the claim of truth made by patriarchal discourses. These include not only the construct of a literary canon and the delineations of traditional autobiography, but the historical narrative. Exploiting the

²³⁴ Petch 64.

²³⁵ I refer here to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Samuel Richardson's pioneering novel *Pamela*. The narrator also compares the famous letters of *Macbeth*.

²³⁶ Petch 64.

marginalised historical form of myth centres an alternative form of document and throws certitude on its head. Frame simultaneously turns a personal and a national history inside-out by rejecting the institutionalised versions of verity which label her in ways such as 'mad' and 'colonial'. Closely linked to the narrator's awareness of her alien status on the fringe of society is her recognition of the chasm between the 'New Zealand' which derives its cultural and literary heritage from the British fatherland, and New Zealand as it is lived by the narrator. The history inherited and imposed upon the colonial nation can be unveiled as merely another myth.

On the level of post-colonial narrative, therefore, *An Autobiography* combats 'the lingering legacy of the imperial/colonial relation in all its positive and negative aspects'.²³⁷ Just as Frame responds to a centralised social naming system which renders her invisible, post-colonial writers are bound to generate literature from their unique position of 'Other, or outside the cultural and ideological foundations laid by their colonisers'.²³⁸ The legacy of the Empire is itself a unified mythical edifice which, when queried, collapses. The exterior authority which previously approved New Zealand history, that of the 'colonial British hegemony',²³⁹ is thus displaced and dethroned. Frame speaks in a voice which transgresses sacred ground in multiple ways; as a woman inscribing the silenced female experience of history, as a colonial rejecting her heritage, and as a mythographer creating a history which cannot be tangibly proven.

Frame's narrative traces the move from the influence of British literary forefathers towards uncovering a more authentic New Zealand literature. As I emphasised in Chapter Two, however, the discovery does not engender a subscription to an alternative matrilineal tradition but to the transcendent referent of 'pages of prose and poetry' (*Angel*, 193). She continues to manipulate familial metaphors, however, perceiving in the critical response to *The Lagoon and Other Stories* the frustrations of an immature cultural revolution:

[t]he literary critics of the time, having been persuaded that our literature had "come of age", found themselves embarrassed by so many writers writing of childhood: they supposed, How could a nation be adult if it wrote of its childhood? (*Angel*, 216-7).

²³⁷ Donna Brydon, "The Myths That Write Us: Decolonising the Mind", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 10:1 (1987) 4.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Henke 86.

Contradictorily, the same critics are enthralled by her eventual status of an 'overseas reputation', a limited attitude on which the narrator ironically comments:

[p]erhaps we are a lazy people; the literary world is lazy too, preferring to pick up reputations from overseas rather than risk their own judgment within New Zealand (*Envoy*, 422).

Using a metaphor which proliferates throughout the text, that of disguise or borrowed robes, she describes this external seal of approval as 'my paste glitter', satirising the reporter who wants to 'gaze on her and share the jewels' (426). Frame rejects the legislating devices of the patriarchal canon as fake, but expresses such opinion in nationalistic rather than feminist terms. Upon returning to her homeland, therefore, the narrator feels herself to be a pioneering force articulating a genuinely and general 'New Zealand' voice:

[m]y reason for returning was literary ... the prospect of exploring a new country with not so many layers of mapmakers, particularly the country where one first saw daylight and the sun and the dark, was too tantalising to resist ... Living in New Zealand, would be for me, like living in an age of myth makers because it is possible to begin at the beginning and to know the unformed places and to help to form them, to be a myth maker for those who will follow nourished by this generation's layers of the dead (*Envoy*, 414. Emphasis added).

Like Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors, An Autobiography* operates on two levels; that of the *general* marginalised individual striving towards a voice, and that of a society speaking out against false mirrors of itself which are imposed from 'above' and in which it finds itself alienated and homeless.²⁴⁰ Her poems written in London are 'a reflection ... of a New Zealander's search for identity beyond her own country ... In a sense my [pretense at being a West Indian writer] was an escape from a national lie that left a colonial New Zealander overseas without any real identity' (*Envoy*, 308). By overwriting both her own history and that of her society, Frame gains membership in that society even as she inscribes her alienation. And by making 'New Zealand' a geographical and cultural site of resistance, the individual voice, however

On this point, see "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry" in *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. Frank Kay (Auckland: Heinemann Educational, 1978) 9. Baxter says here that 'the task of the New Zealand autobiographer is to deny the nation's myth of itself as a "Happy Island" and a just one'.

socially discredited, attains membership of a new group and a feeling of communality. It is merely a question of widening the lens.

I have dealt with the narrator's awareness in *An Autobiography* of the distance between signified and signifier, or literal and figurative meaning. To adapt Suzette Henke,²⁴¹ language to Frame *does* represent *logo/centrism*, or logic and a centring in an otherwise chaotic and homeless world. However, such an orienting strategy is paradoxical in that language signifies projection toward multiplicity and endless possibility. Indeed, one might say that the 'Envoy' of imagination exists and travels in that space between signifier and signified, or reality and its mirror image in language. Although Frame eventually finds a 'home' in the metaphoric Mirror City, this does not symbolise the attainment of some static peak, but rather her commitment to an limitless 'travelling along the network of words' (*Is-Land*, 17). To invoke Barthes once again:

there always remains, around the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating...One could say that a language offers to myth an open-work meaning.²⁴²

As I have explained, Frame's autobiography manipulates the potentiality of language in order to project an autobiographical myth of herself. Upon the text's closure, therefore, the reader is left with a Frame persona, or a convincing mythic edifice behind which the author quietly recedes.

Yet language is not only expressed as a vehicle for transcending the reality of life, but as one which also allows participation in it. As her fictional character Mavis says in *Living in the Maniototo*, 'the writer knows that his want should fill the world, that to write you have to be at a terrible point of loss and stay there wanting to write, wanting in not out'.²⁴³ As such, autobiography does not seek closure, but new openings and possibilities. Through the transformative power of language and the imagination, *An Autobiography* seeks not to encapsulate a life but to move ever outwards from the reality of fact to the infinite territory of poetry. To invoke Carlos Fuentes, imagination is the force which opens up and gives life to both past and future.²⁴⁴ Frame transcends the limiting concepts of reality and history by using them as

²⁴¹ Henke 86: '[a]nd both [Stephen Dedalus and Janet Frame's narrator] take refuge from the chaos of nily life by retreating to a logocentric world of the verbal imagination'.

²⁴² Barthes 143.

²⁴³ Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (London: Women's Press, 1981) 186.

²⁴⁴ Carlos Fuentes, "Words Apart", *The Guardian*, 24 Feb. 1989, 29-30.

merely a starting point in her mythic system of transformation. The false personae imposed upon the narrator through language and silence, by society and by false resolutions of her own, are cast off once she finds a place which both is, and is not, in this world. The autobiography is simultaneously the product of her quest and the logbook of the voyage.

The entire Frame canon is characterised by this 'theme of transcendence through language, the power of metaphor, its hidden power to direct and enrich'.²⁴⁵ As Patrick Evans says:

[f]or her ...t here is little distinction between life and art, for the process of shaping appears to begin with perception and not with a conscious act of creation. To write three volumes of autobiography ... is not to alter her purpose or necessarily to signal the end of the fiction-writing process in her life. Indeed, there seems to be little alteration of emphasis, language and ideas in the move from 'art' to 'life', and to read these works is to be suspended again, magically and rather mysteriously, in a space that lies between the two.²⁴⁶

It is therefore appropriate that *An Autobiography* is a chimera, a suspension of disbelief, and a Mirror City which transmutes and metamorphosises reality. At the end of the text, the narrator can simultaneously cast off her ill-fitting masks and maintain the concealment of her nakedness under the technicolour dreamcoat of language.

²⁴⁵ Evans "Janet Frame" 379.

²⁴⁶ Ibid 382.

Finally, A Room with a View...

The conceptual framework of this discussion was founded on a reconsideration of identity and subjectivity as they are figured in women's autobiographical narratives. A feminist agenda experiences temporary pause when confronted with the prevailing doctrines of deconstruction and postmodernism. Announcing the death of the subject as well as the author, deconstruction threatens the very motivation inspiring the inscription - or study - of either autobiography or women's gendered discourse. However, the barrier erected by this school of thought presents a crack through which women's autobiography can conceivably become re/visible.

I have illustrated that the female self is always already in linguistic discord. Any attempt to discover an interior or experiential female reality must involve negotiation with the looming images of women engendered by socio-cultural structures and legislated through language and literature. Phallogocentric discourses permeate our literary heritage and everyday experience. Yet other voices would speak from amongst the shadows cast by the patriarchal monolith. They contribute to a tradition which has been historically silenced and rendered invisible, yet whose latent presence has always sustained its centralised counterpart. In assessing the works of New Zealand women autobiographers, therefore, I have aimed at a deconstruction of the phallic tower in all of its guises - patriarchal discourse, phallogocentric language and the socio-cultural law-of-the-father.

Recognition of the (pre)existence of an alternative, matrilineal or women's continuous narrative allows us to undermine one of the central foundations of this tower. I have attempted to challenge the entrenchment of a female Other, which has been used historically to both denote and decry women's difference, with a feminist (m)Other. When forged upon such an alternative mainstay, female identity and subjectivity achieve new definitions and regain a validity of discourse. My critical positioning has acknowledged the importance of both tower and shadow, in tracing the influence of the predominating patriarchal authority and the emergent female tradition which has laid quietly - but not always submissively - beneath it.

The autobiographies of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Robin Hyde and Janet Frame have revealed a parallel motivation. All three texts pivot upon a re/solution of the mother-daughter dilemma underpinning one's self-definition as woman. To recapitulate, Sylvia Ashton-Warner repeats the positive

example of her mother in her efforts to coordinate or conciliate the diverse aspects of her identity as woman artist. Robin Hyde presents a more ambivalent response, choosing to lock away her mother's bequest of the silenced narrative. I have positioned Janet Frame's *An Autobiography* further along the continuum, in its final rejection of both heritages, and its resort to language as gender transcendent signifier.

Each text is haunted and inspired by the negotiation of paternal and maternal mythic structures and silences. In addition, subsidiary solutions are offered to the crises of the 'woman artist' who identifies herself in terms of that which is essentially a cultural oxymoron. Ashton-Warner's *I Passed this Way* employs a symbolic and imagistic subtext as a reservoir for rebellion that exceeds the primary narrative's capacity for outspokenness. This strategic technique subtly underlines the author's overt questioning of socially defined parameters conscribing women. By the same token, its inclusion is indicative of the power of social forces which ban an open voicing of women's dilemmas. As a means of recourse to these pressures, the natural environment is recurrently promoted. A gesture towards this anti-social ordering framework colours the subtextual layer of Ashton-Warner's narrative, particularly in its distinct alignment between natural imagery and female sexuality.

This exploitation of natural tropes is reflected, albeit in a less sustained form, in Hyde's *A Home in this World*. For both Ashton-Warner and Hyde, the natural environment is presented as a romanticised option to alienating social systems yet, conversely, as a signifier of imposed isolation. Each author seizes upon the feared association of women and nature, in order to project a potentially excessive and unruly female sexuality. This reappropriation is particularly illustrated through the mining of sea, river and volcanic imagery in *I Passed this Way* to denote frustrated or proliferating desire. Hyde's subversion, on the other hand, concentrates on a celebration of her socially stigmatised pregnancy in communion with the natural environment. Temporarily, at least, her maternal experience transcends its social shame. Natural settings also provide a space of belonging for Janet Frame's narrator. However, as is consistent in the dialectic offered by *An Autobiography*, this metaphor achieves its greatest significance as representative of the processes of imagination and memory. The potential for gendered empathy with natural as opposed to cultural *milieux*, however, is overlooked by Frame.

As a parallel to its refusal to be pinned down in terms of a woman's poetics, *An Autobiography* is the most subtle of these texts in terms of transgressive gain. Frame's eventual catharsis is activated by a deliberate immersion of the self into language. This represents an acquisition of the means to discursive power, and the right to name herself. Yet her remedy is, on the one hand, distinctly Utopian and, on the other, a subscription to the contemporary deconstructive vision. That is, in writing herself out of a specifically female writing experience, Frame appears to bow to prevailing literary expectations.

Janet Frame does, however, deliberately incorporate testimony from the (generalised) margins into her thematic. Again, however, the life of the outsider is not centralised or applauded for its own sake, but is presented as a motivation for the necessary transformation of experience into literature. Her text is punctuated by a series of false choices, or digressions through personae structured out of the linguistic tools of speech and silence. The transcendent solution, however, predicates a persona who is actively *dispersed* in language, and who *projects* literature in preference to reflecting social *imagos*. Frame's narrative is innately paradoxical in its redressal of her perceived non-status as passive, invisible individual, yet its consc(ient)ious prolonging of its author's elusiveness. Despite the author's proposed attempt to remove social masks, therefore, she eventually disappears behind the ultimate disguise of language.

Robin Hyde, by comparison, explicitly insists on the substitutive *truths* that may be articulated by peripheral voices. Her model revises the pejorative connotations of difference, which are particularly evident in the conventional association of the unruly woman with madness. Pre-empting her own banishment to the social fringes, Hyde's narrator promotes the discourse of neurosis, and re-reads the psychiatric asylum as a potential refuge and substitutive community. Her authorial awareness repeatedly intrudes upon the text in order to remind us that real and literary women are precluded from the discourses of rationality and realism. In response, *A Home in this World* emphasises that hysteria and breakdown stem from the compression of individual women into stereotypical roles and socially approved silhouettes. Janet Frame's treatment of madness similarly focuses on its subjective nature and causal influences. In her donning of the mad mask, Frame's schizophrenic persona temporarily provides herself with a defence against the judgmental glance of her social counterparts and, in a similar gesture to Hyde, takes refuge in the historical community of mad artists.

Yet *An Autobiography* tends increasingly towards the realisation that such a choice is tantamount to a new trap. Hyde similarly indicates that, although ec-centricism may offer a strategic retreat, it also hints at dependency on, and sustained residence in, the madwoman's attic. Despite the seizure of the power of signification in madness, neither of these women offer it as an unmediated answer to women's discontent. Both Frame and Hyde recognise that the flipside to an assumption of mad *traits* is the possibility of genuine insanity. The warning inherent in Janet Frame's narrow avoidance of a lobotomy is underlined by Robin Hyde's early suicide. Sylvia Ashton-Warner also learns that emotional breakdown is a form of discourse, yet one bound in silence and passivity rather than active self-determination.

All three autobiographers, however, illustrate the connection between repression and psychosomatic symptoms of distress. The female body serves as a potential site of rebellion against alienating and restricting social dictates, especially to the retrospective I/eye. *I Passed this Way* provides the fullest analysis of such a realisation, representing latent drives through its subtext, and attempting to discuss the social roots which necessitate this silencing. Most saliently, the sexually implicit content of her narrative is closely bound to images of artistry. Ashton-Warner's subnarrative tends unmistakably towards representations of women's synonymous sexuality and creativity which predominate in contemporary feminist writing. Hyde's *A Home in this World* turns upon a less innovative (pr)axis of rebellion, exposing the social codes which conscribe the female body as commodity, and refusing to remain submissive to them. Janet Frame prefers to digress upon corporeality as a sustained link with limiting social structures, seeking a solution through the *denial* of her body. *An Autobiography* is singularly devoid of positive representations of the female body, preferring to focus on its connotations incarceration, shame and inconvenience. Frame's bodily experience is tied to a painful social self-consciousness, and can only be overcome negatively. In other words, a repudiation of social *angst* and its accompanying masks necessitates irrevocable disembodiment or, conversely, complete concealment through linguistic costume.

As I have iterated throughout this thesis, the integration of woman and artist is simultaneously the essential motivation and the most severe test of the three autobiographical attempts to establish identity and narrative subjectivity. Despite the conflict of interests exacerbated by the creative urge, the act of writing remains the ultimate solution and means of catharsis in each of these texts. All of the women discussed strive to establish a real or

metaphorical room as a central eye/I in the maelstrom of obligations and expectations. Characteristically, Ashton-Warner's space is concrete, and is pragmatically built into the framework of her familial routine. In *I Passed this Way*, writing is chosen as the most rewarding outlet for the narrator's continuous drive towards creativity, and the only one which can be practically assimilated into a life filled with marital and teaching duties. This reflects the structural layering of Ashton-Warner's text, or the juxtaposition of a narrative profiling *coordination* of conflicting desires with a radically sexual and violently imaged subtext.

As a contrast to Ashton-Warner's mediation between self and other(s), the movement of Hyde and Frame towards identity as women writers leads to complete abdication from mainstream social environments. Both Hyde and Frame define their ideal rooms as symbolic representations of liberation from the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother, whereas Ashton-Warner opts for a coordination of diverse duties and drives. Robin Hyde writes in isolation and, pertinently, stresses the attic as an setting conducive to literary growth. As I have suggested, this *locus* is a metaphorical as well as a literal double-bind. Hyde implies that until women's voices are heard and respected, they will be limited to breakdown and neurosis as last resorts. Janet Frame's evocation of a writing space is the most sustained, and her overriding solution is the most abstract. Although Frame reiterates the potential interplay between the worlds of fiction and reality, life and Mirror City, her removal of self to the interstices of signifier and signified necessitates the sacrifice of social intercourse and an erasure of gendered subjectivity.

All of these rooms delineate the right to verbal and creative freedom, and the right of the individual voice to the status of normality. Yet no re/location is instigated without the influence of social and cultural pressures, and the extraction of a personal price. As I have emphasised throughout each textual analysis, the recurrent sacrificial victim is the female body and its related sexuality. Ironically, this dynamic is encouraged by each writer's response to her maternal heritage. Still susceptible to the pressures of their social surroundings, and hence reading the age-old cultural code of reproduction in their bodies, all three authors minimise physical feeling and sexual desire in their narrative frameworks. In an absolute dismissal of procreancy for creativity, Frame makes a choice that has been historically imposed upon literary women. Ashton-Warner's early recognition of the power contained in sensual experience is sublimated beneath the social

prescriptions of marital fidelity. Robin Hyde, on the other hand, dabbles in sexual liberation and pays the taxing price of an illegitimate child. In addition to the attached social stigma, sole responsibility of this child inculcates constant weariness and despair, and defers her vocation as a full-time writer.

The female reader is forced, in her encounter with these mother texts, to position herself in relation to the varied solutions that are proffered. As the reflector of each autobiographer's dilemma, she is faced with binary options - nature or culture, speech or silence, creativity or procreativity, isolation or interaction. Just as Hyde and Frame reject the examples of their mothers as victims, we may be tempted to respond negatively to the three writers. Viewed as a whole, these New Zealand women's autobiographies represent less of a resolution to the dilemmas of the woman artist than a spectrum of problematics. Each is still stained by the anxiety inherent in female authorship, and by the losses incurred in the radical decision to prioritise writing as vocation. Yet, in a more affirmative sense, each woman asserts her visibility, if briefly before being swallowed by the void of critical oversight. The various writing rooms created by the three authors are not achieved without substantial loss, and do not offer an unmitigated intellectual, spiritual or physical freedom. That each is forced to *create* such a room bears witness to the truism that women are bound about by social disapproval and cultural convention. Nevertheless, study of the autobiographies of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Robin Hyde and Janet Frame provides us with a view, which is both an insight into every woman's reality, and an outward vista of our yet to be achieved possibilities.

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